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# Private Deaths: The Impossibilities of Home in the Modernist Novel

Ava Bindas

Macalester College, [bindas.ava@gmail.com](mailto:bindas.ava@gmail.com)

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**Private Deaths:  
The Impossibilities of Home in the Modernist Novel**

Ava Bindas

Advisor: Andrea Kaston Tange

Honors Thesis  
English Department  
Macalester College  
April 26, 2017

## **Abstract**

This project examines novels by Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton, Virginia Woolf, and Nella Larsen featuring female characters who contemplate or commit suicide. Relying on a composite theoretical framework that weaves together geography theories of spaces as well as gendered theories of bodies by authors like Judith Butler, Rita Felski, and Victoria Rosner, I argue women commit suicide because their modern homes fail to accommodate their gendered bodies. Focusing less on the moment of death than on the conditions that make choosing to live impossible, this project tracks how, during a moment of supposed liberation, conceptions of gender, modernity, and domestic space coalesce to situate women's bodies in liminal, unlivable homes. The escalating complexity and progressively blurred agency of the suicides in these novels reflects an expanding understanding of how the modern era muddles and destabilizes relationships between bodies and spaces, especially female bodies and homes.

## **Acknowledgements**

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This project is dedicated to Kelley Mosiman.

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## Introduction

Eleven years after penning her domestic horror story, “The Yellow Wallpaper,” Charlotte Perkins Gilman published *The Home: Its Work and Influences* in 1903. Based on the shifts in American society she has witnessed over the course of her lifetime, she breaks from literary writing to sketch an alarming portrait of the home in the midst of sweeping modern transformations.<sup>1</sup> Gilman notes pronounced differences in public life and institutions from those of nineteenth-century America. The country is roaring — spurring revolutionary new knowledge, unprecedented political organizations, and a richer sense of nation — but these exciting improvements are reserved for men. This modern world traps women inside archaic and stagnant homes. To advocate for expanding women’s sphere of influence and even blurring the divisions between public and private, men’s and women’s spaces, Gilman frames the home as “a human institution,” and relies on the modern zeal for progress to convince readers, “All human institutions are open to improvement. This specially dear and ancient one, however, we have successfully kept shut, and so it has not improved as have some others” (4). The traditional home, in this framework, not only stifles women, it inhibits societal progress as a whole. Therefore, to best serve modern society, it is in the interest of readers of all genders to reconfigure the home.

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<sup>1</sup> Gilman’s critique of the home and domestic spaces is undoubtedly feminist, but it is limited by its roots in what is generally referred to as “first-wave feminism.” That is, Gilman, like many of her feminist contemporaries, advocates only on behalf of white, middle- and upper-class women and explicitly relies on racist, classist hierarchies to promote some women’s liberation at the expense of other women’s humanity. Her argument also suffers from a reliance on the contemporary pseudo-science later coined “social Darwinism,” which relies on reductive and dangerous interpretations of Charles Darwin’s theories of evolution and “survival of the fittest” to justify oppressive hierarchies of humanity. Based on these conceptions, social Darwinists oftentimes endorsed conservative politics, which they believed promoted the proliferation of people deemed superior and suppressed the survival of individuals deemed to be inferior.

Despite this resounding call for a new formulation of the home, Gilman devotes most of the book to substantiating her critiques of the current home rather than offering specific visions of advancement. Homes are requisite, and always have been, to constitute what Gilman deems a healthy society, and she relies on loose notions of “evolution” to link change with improvement. Consequently, both public life and the home must change over time, and if one changes without regard to the other, this misalignment signals a dangerous failing of society. Therefore, she urges the contemporary reader, in this new millennium of progress and expansion it is only appropriate that, “We may all have homes to love and grow in without the requirement that half of us shall never have anything else” (12). To support this vision of expanded opportunity for women, in her chapters, Gilman delves into how children, the “domestic arts,” the lives of men, and other aspects of private life would not only endure, but benefit from, a home that ushers more aspects of public life inside. This, in turn, would permit women greater access beyond the physical and figurative boundaries of the traditional domestic sphere.

Throughout, Gilman contends that this reconfiguration of the home is necessary to accomplish its fundamental functions — to offer “rest, peace, quiet, comfort, health, and that degree of personal expression requisite” (3). She tempers any suggestion of radical social upheaval by reassuring readers, “The home *in its essential nature* is pure good” (8). The reform she calls for may be unprecedented, but it nevertheless aligns with some “essential” nature of the home. Such essentializing extends to the woman inside each home; she must be different than her domestic predecessors in the modern era, but ultimately achieve the same aims. The public sphere may become more accessible to

women in Gilman's ideal modern home, but the purpose of domestic life, and the woman's responsibility to maintain it, remains intact.

This boundary affirms Gilman's — and other early feminists' — acceptance of the patriarchy as a given. On the whole, sexual difference was taken as absolute, and women sought to capitalize on their feminine strengths to prove their worthiness to be taken seriously as public citizens, rather than rewriting the model of citizenship itself to be more expansive. That is to say, as evidenced by Gilman's conception of the modern home, the fundamental shifts of British and American society in the beginning of the twentieth century were undoubtedly profound but only initiated the process of women seeing equal status to men.

In this Honors project, I delve into four transatlantic modernist novels written by women: *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin, *House of Mirth* by Edith Wharton, *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf, and *Passing* by Nella Larsen. Like Gilman does in reality, these four novels present fictional characters reconciling the limitations of the home at a moment when the physical and figurative bounds of both public and private life in are in flux. Though thirty years separate the publication Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* in 1899 from that of Nella Larsen's *Passing* in 1929, these texts encompass a socio-political context in which the role of middle- and upper-class women changed irreversibly in America and Britain. Both before and after the First World War, women began to cultivate a public presence, sought the right to vote, and assumed professional, familial, and romantic roles that were previously unthinkable. These shifts sought to grant women increasing liberties and rights, and while feminists and other challengers to the status quo made important advances in this regard, the modern era also invited new risks and



liabilities into women's lives. These novels rely on Gilman's teleology of the shifting modern home, but go even further than she envisions; the imaginative possibility of fiction enables a complex, expansive portrait of modern domestic spaces.

Such radical shifts in society mirrored profound literary shifts. Victorian and realist narratives no longer sufficed to convey the new and complex contemporary experience, giving way to literary modernism. Part of a broader transformation of western art, modernist literature was no one thing, but, reminiscent of Gilman's conception of the modern home, it foremost sought to accommodate the new nature of society, which was oftentimes fractured and multifarious. As women increasingly entered public life, they benefitted from modernism's impulse to pioneer new forms of representation. Authors and poets like Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, and H.D. were just some modernist women writers experimenting with new storytelling tools to convey narratives about women in more authentic-feeling ways. Similarly, as black Americans settled in northern cities in the post-Reconstruction era, modernism set the stage for the Harlem Renaissance and writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Countee Cullen, Wallace Thurman to tell black American stories.

While literary modernism, in the most hackneyed summation, sought to "make it new," the four authors I study by no means abandon the past. As women themselves, they understand acutely that to tell stories about women in the beginning of the twentieth century, they must instead engage with progressivism at the point it intersects traditional, normative notions of femininity. Oftentimes, this site of negotiation for modern women is the home. As Gilman makes abundantly clear, the home generally serves as the quintessential space associated with women throughout history, continuing into this

modern moment. It is the space where women are expected to reside happily because it situates them among only the labor for which the patriarchy demarcates them most suited, namely housekeeping and raising a family. Even feminist reforms paradoxically stem from the home; it is the place from which liberated women venture out. However, whether considered the basis of patriarchal or feminist consideration, this expectation that women universally reside in the home does not acknowledge the reality that many can or do not.

These four novels depict the complicated reconfiguration of the modern home, and present the profound difficulty individuals face in shaping a harmonious private and public life, despite modern promises of increased liberty. Because the home and domestic sphere are so firmly correlated with women and femininity, female characters are the main, though not exclusive, focus of my project. These characters share the ultimate goal of finding a home, figuratively and literally. To portray these characters' searches, these texts articulate discussions of class dynamics, marriage politics, gender roles, and intense homosocial (and sometimes homosexual) relationships, which were for the first time understood as constructed and acknowledged as influential forces in individuals' lives. Though these forces have the potential to undermine traditional foundation of the home, they are pervasive elements of modern women's lives and, subsequently, must find space within the modern home. Thus, I would argue the modern home — to truly be a place of comfort for women — cannot merely, as Gilman suggests, change its form to maintain its function.

Imagining this sort of home presents remarkable difficulty, given the confines women face in any moment of time. Furthermore, these boundaries compound for women

of color and women who are not securely middle- or upper-class in America and Britain. Although the modern moment offered unique promises of reform and reshaping of society, public transformation did not translate to private liberation. This slight, disproportionately affecting women, permeates *The Awakening*, *The House of Mirth*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, and *Passing*. Female characters, facing distinct challenges, share the same structural obstacle modern life creates. In various ways, they find themselves unhappy at or in search of home, and without tools or alternatives to remedy their situations. Denied the figurative shelter promised by literal homes, these texts portray the modern woman as one who, while enjoying her escalating freedom and consequent visibility of modern society, because she lacks a home, ultimately cannot survive it. In all four novels, as women navigate domestic spaces, they contemplate or commit suicide.

Though much scholarly thought has been dedicated to investigating modernism and women's role in it, there is a startling lack of writing specifically about the relationship between modernism and suicide, as opposed to considering it an isolated event in a text that happens to be modernist. A handful of scholars such as Jared Stark and Holly Laird have considered suicide more broadly while reading canonical modernist writers such as Hemingway, Faulkner, and Conrad. Their analyses rely on biographic information and other types of contemporary data, such as sociological theory and newspaper op-eds, to interpolate fictional representations of suicides with contemporary cultural attitudes towards self-killing. However, these arguments, predicated on the historical context of suicide in modernist texts, ignore crucial considerations and yield conclusions that fail to account for factors not consistently or explicitly written about in newspapers. The most glaring shortcoming, highlighted acutely by the four novels

constituting this project, is the lack of gendered analysis. My project, by contrast, recognizes the necessity of considering gender dynamics into any historical analysis, and seeks to discuss suicide as a distinctly gendered phenomenon of modernism. One caveat for this aim: although my project focuses on the connections between the female gender and suicide, I want to be careful not to conflate gender solely with womanhood. Gender expectations are powerful regardless of sex, so although it may be the subject of explicit discussion in my project, I maintain that the influence of masculinity in Hemingway, Faulkner, and Conrad must be considered complicit with the self-violence in their work.

Furthermore, literary scholarship dealing with suicide tends to form two camps: First, some literary scholars approach suicides with the dulled tools of Freudian psychoanalysis or other psychological theory, determined to diagnose characters and articulate some sort pathology of suicide.<sup>2</sup> In these readings, a character's actions become symptoms, and their narrative arcs blur until they resemble the death drive.<sup>3</sup> Others, by comparison, read suicide because of purely social causes. The self-inflicted death, in these readings, is coded to varying extents as liberation from oppressive social circumstances. At best, this figuration of suicide paints characters as martyrs, dying for something noble and bigger than themselves. At worst, this understanding erases

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<sup>2</sup> The modernist era coincided with the translation of Sigmund Freud's pivotal psychological theory into English, among other languages. Both contemporary modernist authors as well as scholars studying their work later on frequently rely on various facets of Freud's psychoanalytic theory and other work to garner meaning. Especially as a lens through which to study literature, some of Freud's work is exceptionally useful. However, it is important to recognize the limits of Freud, such as the fact that most of his work assumes patriarchy as a given rather than a framework to critique, which is especially problematic for a project that seeks to consider gendered positions with nuance.

<sup>3</sup> The "death drive" is a term coined by Sigmund Freud in his 1920 book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Freud contrived the term to explain puzzling instances of individuals denying themselves pleasure or seemingly inducing their own suffering, such as war veterans who continually flashback to trauma experienced in battle. Freud is very tentative about the concept, but hypothesizes that these traumatized individuals reexperience trauma because some drive propels them towards death.

suffering and excuses violence. Both impulses to interpret suicides in literature particularly undermine the experiences and agency of women. The woman who kills herself can be conveniently read as a hysteric or a fated feminist ahead of her time. The problem with both readings is that they collapse nuance and withhold agency in ways that buffer readers from the full tragedy of women's self-inflicted deaths. Such reductive, straight-forward explanations for an action so significant as choosing to die fail to be compelling. Pathologizing or eulogizing suicide, especially of that of women, feels like a willful misreading of such deaths because neither account much for the person dying; the forces and structures of power are more important than the body, the life, itself.

Many of the shortcomings of these interpretive models spawn from their reliance on the mind and psychological dimension to suicide at the expense of the body. The impulse to look for explanation in the psyche is understandable, given that the present-day western world generally conceives of suicide as a tragic symptom of mental illness. However, imposing this impulse onto fictional suicides fails to account for the constructed materiality of realist narratives, ignoring the physicality of bodies in order to emphasize intangible factors such as agency or social constructs. In both fiction and reality, this trade-off between mind and body is a false one; therefore, conclusions about suicides that fail to account for the interplay between the material and immaterial, bodily and social are unconvincing.

This is particularly salient when considering suicides in early twentieth-century texts, when female bodies enter new spaces, and as a result, encounter new modern liberties and risks, marked by blurring of boundaries. Previously, in nineteenth-century narratives, confined to the hyper-regulated domestic sphere, the worst fate a well-to-do

woman could suffer was a “social death” — a dire embarrassment or loss of virtue — that decimated her social life, which was the entirety of a woman’s worth. Modern women, in gaining more liberty, also gain more to lose. Whether they are on the front lines of suffrage marches, the lives of modern women transform because their homes come to be less rigidly demarcated as oppositional to the public sphere in modern project of liberation. As a result of this shift, homes, previously secure to the point of stifling, become potentially less hospitable to women. In some instances, this misalignment between the needs of women and the private sphere proves unsustainable. In the four novels comprising this project, I argue women commit suicide because their modern homes fail to accommodate their gendered bodies.

Each chapter of this project tracks female characters within a specific text as they search for suitable domestic spaces, and analyzes why these searches and spaces prove unsustainable. For my analysis, I rely on a composite theoretical framework that weaves together commentaries on gender, modernity, and spaces. Foremost, Rita Felski’s *Gender of Modernity* is foundational to my understanding the relationship between gender and modernity. Grounded in literature and sociology, Felski outlines a theory of the modern woman's constitution: she argues that modernism predicates itself on the female because in order to be progressive and expansive it must construe woman as the atemporal outsider. Specifically Felski illustrates how the modern moment configures women as nostalgic and “prehistoric,” the fixed origin (vessel) from which all progress — modernity — spawns. In addition, she offers useful commentary on the underlying modernist anxiety of feminization of writing. Paradoxically, while women are requisite for modernity, the feminization of the modern would be apocalyptic for society.

Because my project relies on the correlation between women and the domestic home, I also frequently refer to the work of Victoria Rosner. In *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life*, she claims that modernization is inextricably linked to the conception of home, and relies on architectural theory to analyze how the structures of frames, thresholds, studies, and interiors mediate the modern experiences of women. She argues the home must be considered both a crucial location of modernization as well as modernism. Considering the physicality of spaces in the real British and American context as well as the fictional worlds of female modernist authors, Rosner demonstrates how domestic spaces negotiated the modern, and discusses the implications of these shifts on families and women. In particular, her analysis of thresholds lays vital groundwork for my discussions of liminality in the domestic sphere.

Finally, to flesh out my understanding of how women experience and are understood by society, this project also relies on kernels of Judith Butler's theory. In particular, Butler's contention in *Gender Trouble* that the "intelligibility" of one's gender correlates to an individual's "livability," is helpful to substantiate the salience of gender when considering self-killing. Dying, in this framework, depends simultaneously on an individual's gender as well as other's perception of the gendered, performing body. Additionally, in *Bodies That Matter*, Butler offers an expansive reading of *Passing*, probing the contemporary boundaries of the term "queer" in the text to reframe the protagonists' unhappiness and misfortune as a result of broader normative forces, rather than social faux-paux.

Building on these frameworks, this essay examines how in *The Awakening*, *The House of Mirth*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, and *Passing* women die trying to find home, despite

modern promises of liberty. Rather than resolve, I seek to scrutinize the many complexities of the oftentimes ambiguous deaths in these novels. In rereading these deaths as something other than the logical end of a teleology or a grab at salvation, I push back against reductive readings of women's lives as well and underscore the difficulty and importance of the feminist project to equalize the figurative and literal position of women in society.



## **The Liminality of Home**

Kate Chopin published *The Awakening* in 1899 to mixed reviews; many contemporary readers found its portrayals of women controversial and incompatible with standards of propriety. Though a concerted feminist movement was taking hold in America at the eve of the new millennium, many of the patriarchal gender expectations that perpetuated sexism and misogyny remained intact. During Chopin's lifetime, women were being urged out of the house and into the streets for a gamut of causes. Suffragists, temperance activists, and New Women<sup>4</sup> were moving from the fringes into the mainstream of white, middle- and upper- class society, but this shift did not unconditionally shield women like Chopin herself from some disdain for her public authorial presence as a young widow. Nineteenth-century society, for women like Chopin, dictated that, for those who could afford it, women would remain in the home, tending to social, emotional, and aesthetic labor. Men were the public face for the family, and would make economic and political decisions. Women, in turn, were expected to be the moral heart of the home, doting on the husband and children. Given whiteness and middle- or upper-class status, the spouse in the home would always be a woman, and the partner earning money and acting in the public sphere would be a man. But like Chopin's

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<sup>4</sup> While the "New Woman" does not have a singular character, the term refers to the type of generally middle-class woman who, either by choice or necessity, sought emancipation from the confines of the private sphere in the late nineteenth century. Though the term was coined in England to describe British women both fictional and real, the traits of the New Woman invariably appeared in American women as well. For a more extensive analysis of the New Woman specifically in *The Awakening*, refer to Ann Heilmann.

own life and work demonstrate, women were — out of necessity and desire — pushing back.

*The Awakening* follows Edna Pontellier as she reconciles her dawning desire for liberty with the stifling expectations of being a young wife and mother. The novel begins as Edna and her businessman husband, Léonce, enjoy their annual vacation to a resort community on the Gulf of Mexico. They spend most of their time mingling with old friends who are also married, except for the spinster, Mademoiselle Reisz, and the young bachelor, Robert Lebrun. Like he has done with other ineligible women in years past, Robert pays special attention to Edna in something like a seduction. In turn, Edna becomes infatuated with Robert. Her attraction catalyzes a transformation of how she conceives her domestic existence; her duties as wife, hostess, and mother suddenly feel insufferable and she begins to neglect and defy her domestic duties. Her discontent of these responsibilities and expectations proves to be inextricable from dissatisfaction she feels within the spaces she occupies. Edna continually seeks out a place that she can control, one that both validates her newfound desires and maintain the trappings of domesticity she understands to be requisite for any woman. Her goal to find a space that aligns with both of these needs instigates a traumatic journey: propelled by her dawning understanding of her body and self, Edna cycles through spaces, but because no place grants her the degree of control she requires, they prove unsustainable.

Literary scholars have also struggled to find a place for Edna and *The Awakening* in a scholarly landscape oftentimes delineated by chronology. Chopin's work was not widely read until the latter half of the twentieth century, when second-wave feminists praised Edna's liberatory aspirations. For some late-twentieth and twenty-first century

readers, Chopin's story is a clear harbinger, and even participant, of the modern feminist movement. Despite the story's pervasive naturalist tone, the relentless destabilizing of gender roles, remarkable degree of interiority granted to female characters, and explicit discussion of female sexuality provide rich evidence for scholars seeking to group the novel with modernist works. Marianne DeKoven specifically argues that *The Awakening* "[deploys] features of modernist form — decentered subjectivity, rupture of linearity in plot and temporal structure, foregrounding of pre-Oedipal, pre-symbolic language, stylistic indeterminacy, multiplicity, fragmentation," but not for the same purposes of the modern texts proceeding it (20). Instead, DeKoven believes that female proto-modernist writers like Kate Chopin and Charlotte Perkins Gilman employ these strategies due to "a fear of punishment for a desire for the new, a desire felt to be unallowable" (20). However, others hold up Chopin's story as evidence of everyday women's desire for liberation in the nineteenth century, arguing that it is more helpful, and in some ways more radical, to conceive of *The Awakening* as a feminist text outside of modernism. Whether situating Chopin among other Americans, or in the company of authors around the world, analyses like that of Maria Mikolchak, who focuses on the motif of "female adultery" in the novel, show compelling fidelity between *The Awakening* and other nineteenth century texts, especially those written by and about women. I would argue, however, that pinning *The Awakening* to a discrete literary moment is not fruitful. Instead, acknowledging the ambiguity — how the text is both modern and unmodern, though neither one markedly — both feels the most accurate and reflects the precarious, transitional nature of Edna's life itself.

On vacation, sequestered in a luxurious resort, Edna occupies such a transitional place, one that simultaneously presents all the trappings of her home, connoting the same duties and behaviors of traditional femininity, but by definition is also intended to be a departure from the burdens and banality of home. In a house, Edna should prioritize her husband and children, and on vacation she should prioritize herself — because she experiences both of these impulses, vacation, for Edna, can be understood as what anthropologist Victor Turner famously coined “liminal space.” Among an intricate portrait of human rituals, he succinctly defines a liminal space as the middle part of a ritual where inhabitants are at once “betwixt and between,” such as when a woman is engaged to be married (Turner 91). This threshold necessitates ambiguity and uncertainty; participants in the ritual cannot undo the past nor anticipate what will happen in the future.

The characteristics of a liminal moment in a ritual also define Edna’s vacation. In some respects, the Pontellier vacation adheres to the same behaviors and expectations of their married life in the city; Léonce leaves to smoke with the other men and executes an agenda separate from his wife, while Edna, in turn, keeps mainly female company and follows her husband’s lead both indoors and out. However, Mr. Pontellier need not leave the vacation house to go to work, and Edna seeks leisure during the days, rather than tend to the house and children. This liminal space between a normal life and a departure from it destabilize the expectations for Edna and make standards for female behavior more nebulous. Specifically, these places mandate variant expectations for how she, as a woman, should present her body and behave in a given space. Destabilized gender roles

mean that Edna can socialize with different people in contexts otherwise inappropriate or unavailable, negotiate her own schedule, and cut back on domestic duties.

What is acceptable and taboo are thrown into question on the Pontellier vacation, although standards of propriety are not discarded all together. Specifically for Edna, rules regarding where her female body can go and how it can act become less stringent on vacation. As a result, Edna, a married woman, has more opportunities to pursue her illicit romantic interest because spaces exist in which it is permissible to spend unchaperoned, unstructured time with in an infamous bachelor. For instance, Edna first appears in the novel on a porch, a liminal space betwixt and between the house and public. In this private space accessible to the public, Robert propositions her, signaling the start of their courtship. After failing to amuse Léonce, they are left alone on the porch to recollect an earlier misadventure and “each was interested in what the other said” (Chopin 46). Edna ends the conversation with the seemingly unprompted realization that, “I see Léonce isn’t coming back” (47). In contrast to her remiss husband, Robert eagerly shares experiences and spaces with Edna. Their delightful, egalitarian exchange is juxtaposed with Léonce’s dismissive attitude towards his wife and physical absence from the home. From the outset, this positions Robert as a substitute for Edna’s husband. The ambiguity of the porch fosters this subversive substitution: on one hand, he presents as the new man of Edna’s house, while on the other, he is merely a friendly, proper houseguest.

This substitution is possible because porches are specifically American types of liminal spaces and are gendered female. Sue Bridwell Beckham looks at historical records as well as literature from the American Renaissance to convey the paradoxical and profound significance of American porches, especially for women. She remarks that

porches are oft overlooked in architectural history — written off as a simple necessity in the southern United States and unimportant adornment in the north. However, Beckham argues that porches provide women relief from oppressive roles and boundaries because they are social liminal spaces: “Occupants of a porch are betwixt and between because they are neither fully sheltered from the elements nor fully exposed to them — neither fully a part of the workings of the public sphere nor fully excluded from them” (72). Pointing to various American novels, including *The Awakening*, she shows how porches act as a critical social space for women who are otherwise confined to their homes to have conversations and make connections they would never have inside their homes due to opportunity or priority. Porches also situate women in a more public space, allowing them to exist beyond the walls of their house and broach the public sphere while still remaining at home. In this sense, porches can be a space of transgression. Yet, porches remain regulated home spaces to some degree; women labor on porches, preparing dinner or doing crafts, and watch over their children who may also play on porches. Beckham acknowledges this uncertain blend, asserting that a woman on a porch, such as Edna Pontellier on vacation, “is subject neither to the rules that govern her performance in her husband’s house nor to those of the public domain” (84). The porch offers Edna freedom from her typical domestic life, but the liberty the porch grants Edna is also fleeting and bounded.

Despite its imperfections, however, the porch remains the most viable place in which Edna can defy gender expectations. Consequently, Edna relies on the liminality of the porch to get closer to Robert and push away her husband. At one point, Robert walks Edna home and remain with her on the porch, making her comfortable until Léonce

Pontellier arrives — underscoring once again how the two men act as substitutes of one another, or cannot exist simultaneously in a pseudo-home space with Edna. Her husband's homecoming supplants the relationship Edna desires with Robert with the one she has with her husband, who immediately interrogates why she is awake outside, literally not in her place. Léonce urges his wife into the house, but Edna refuses. Her defiance prompts a gamut of responses from Léonce: a stern suggestion, faux concern, harsh rebuke, and, finally, obstinate supervision. Despite the multitude of his appeals, Edna clings to the porch and resists going to sleep inside the house, where she belongs, according to her husband. She stays outside, resisting rest, in order to be with her newfound feelings of lust that undermine her "accident" marriage to Léonce. Although part of the house, but not within its walls, Edna stays on the porch and sacrifices her well-being to literally position herself at the fringes of the feminine space, as delineated for her by her husband. Her resolve to remain on the porch implies a rejection of the notion that the walls that are for her protection, and she accepts the vulnerability of the porch in exchange for some degree of autonomy.

Léonce, however, resists Edna's claim on the porch, and his attempts to demarcate the porch as masculine exhibit the limits of the porch's liberation potential. Because Edna's actions derive their power from their opposition to her husband's wishes, Léonce insists on remaining outside with Edna; he smokes cigars and drinks, gendering the space as masculine in an attempt to reinstate control over his usually dutiful wife. The porch, because it is the threshold between a public and private spaces, becomes a battleground for control. Earlier experiences on the porch piques Edna's interest in what more is possible in spaces beyond the control of her husband. In order to explore the

possibilities further, Edna cannot cede, but doing so, she forgoes the comfort of sleep, which she cannot do forever. Her occupation of the porch continues her pattern of liberation in that she thwarts what is expected of her, but it also shows that remaining in liminal space is unsustainable. Eventually, she must rest.

Chopin's final reference to this porch reaffirms the eventual inhospitable nature of liminal spaces, as well as their ironic importance to Edna. After having her heart broken by Robert, she returns to the place where they fell in love: the porch of the vacation house. However, the place is not the same. Occupied by the landlord, Victor, the house is unavailable to Edna. She attempts to explain her presence to the puzzled man:

“I walked up from the wharf” she said, “and heard the hammering. I supposed it was you, mending the porch. It’s a good thing. I was always tripping over those loose planks last summer. How dreary and deserted everything looks!” It took Victor some little time to comprehend that she had come in Beaufort’s lugger, that she had come alone, and for no purpose but to rest. (Chopin 173)

Aside from being awkwardly long-winded and unhelpful, Edna's explanation is surprising; at no point during her vacation did she indicate the porch was faulty. To the contrary, the porch oftentimes felt like a sanctuary, which is why she has returned in the first place. But her experience of the porch relies not only on the physical structure of it; without the social and emotional trappings of vacation, she cannot situate herself how she once did on the porch. This sense of alienation from a place she once felt at home perhaps explains why Edna now believes the porch to be broken. Now occupied and literally



reconstructed by a man, it is no longer the female space that allowed her relief and resistance from domestic expectations of a wife and mother.

Once she returns from vacation, Edna cannot comport herself quite the same way again. Because of the liberation Edna experiences on the porch while on vacation, she returns home newly aware of the limitations of her traditional domestic space. Her dawning sexual desires are not just physical, they become tied to Edna's greater sense of fulfillment. Consequently, gendered spaces and roles that once suited Edna no longer satisfy her. Awakened to the expansive ways her body can feel and behave, she cannot fall back asleep and peacefully reenter places that mandate behaviors counter to what she now knows her body to want. As a result, when Edna travels home from vacation, "still under the spell of her infatuation" for Robert, her house in New Orleans becomes intolerable. Edna's body belongs in a space where Robert can also exist, not harbored inside her husband's house. In opposition to porches, the house abounds with domestic comfort but quashes emotional connections.

Edna's home no longer offers her comfort or security because the prescriptions of her upper-class domesticity preclude Edna's deepest desires. The relentless pressures of the house to mother, to hostess, to please her husband draws acute attention to Edna's awakening. When she return to New Orleans, her sexual desires cannot survive the confinement of domesticity. The conflict between the desires of Edna's body versus the place it occupies consequently propels her to find a place that can be a true home, somewhere she feels peace and belonging with her body. Her first attempted remedy to this disconnect is to reify her sexual relationship with Robert, as their affair has proven transformative for Edna in the past. She ferrets out his letters from Mademoiselle Reisz

and reminiscences on their romance, cementing her love for him despite not sharing a single direct interaction. When her patchwork romance is not enough, she attempts to substitute an affair with Arobin for Robert.

However, the limited fulfillment from relics of Robert and sleazy interactions with Arobin fails to make her house more hospitable. Therefore, seeking a home of her own — a space that she can finally control — Edna moves to the minute “pigeon house” down the road. She assures Mademoiselle Reisz, “I know I shall like it, like the feeling of freedom and independence” (134). Without interrogating the difference between a *feeling* of freedom and freedom itself, Edna barrels towards the move without her husband’s approval. In an attempt to curate a space free from the gender roles delineated in her husband’s house, she leaves behind anything purchased by her husband, resulting in “simple and meager deficiencies from her own resources” (140). Yet, she presses forward, ignoring discrepancies between her idealized vision of liberty and the reality of what she has the power to create as a young, albeit wealthy, woman. Edna’s preoccupation about the pigeon house suggests the stakes of this move are higher than she can voice; her idea comes to manifest as Edna’s salvation from unstable ambiguity of liminal spaces. In transplanting her home to the pigeon house, Edna seemingly pursues the thing she needs. Throughout the novel, places only exacerbate her dissatisfaction, so it follows that the solution to her unrest is merely the correct space. But in her pursuit for a panacea, she ignores the warning signs of its potential impossibility and consequent danger.

Fleetingly, the pigeon house serves the purpose Edna imagines. When Robert returns, the pair consummate their love in the house. Rather than the longing that propels

her from space to space, Edna experiences satisfaction with the present and excitement about the future; believing that in forging a new home in the pigeon house she has emerged into a new, full life. With Robert in it, the pigeon house offers the emotional fulfillment impossible with Léonce and the permanence impossible on the porch — it is what a home is supposed to be. She feels liberated, telling Robert not to worry about her husband: “‘I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier’s possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose. If he were to say, ‘Here, Robert, take her and be happy; she is yours,’ I should laugh at you both’” (167). At face value, Edna’s declaration epitomizes feminist sentiment. Edna recognizes the objectified position of women in society and explicitly rejects it.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Edna insists that her social transgressions are significant not because of Robert himself. Instead, that her choices are of her own agency is the most salient aspect of her affair with Robert. Edna did not move to the pigeon house for Robert, she did it for herself. Because she conceptualizes the house as wholly within her control, within it, no man can claim her body as his possession because Edna’s ownership of the space extends to her body within it. Therefore, when men meddle with this ideal home, in the sense Léonce pays the mortgage and Robert abandons the house without consulting his partner, her authority dissolves. In these acts of interference or negligence, the men Edna disavows now assert some claim to the space and her body within it. In turn, the pigeon house becomes another hostile home that cannot sustain her.

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<sup>5</sup> Though I do not pursue it this paper, this notion of self-possession becomes even more complex in *The Awakening* when considered explicitly in conjunction with motherhood. Observing how “motherhood and individuality seem mutually exclusive” in both American society as well as in *The Awakening*, Ivy Schweitzer examines the implications of a feminism in Britain and the United States that oftentimes ignored or suppressed maternity for Edna Pontellier and her plight for liberty and autonomy.

Both Léonce and Robert predicate their actions on the claim they are acting in Edna's best interest, but in practice their actions inflict harm, quashing Edna's sense of liberty because they reassert the autonomy men have over her life. As a husband who benefits from Edna's adherence to traditional gender roles, Léonce even enlists the help of his friend, Doctor Mandelet, to keep Edna in her place. After he experiences inconvenience because of Edna's differing priorities, he laments to the Doctor that his wife "goes tramping about by herself, moping in the street-cars, getting in after dark. I tell you she's peculiar. I don't like it" (118). Léonce can conjure no possible explanation for his wife's behavior. Sympathy for Edna's isolation and restlessness is too alien for him to grasp. Instead, he can only interpret her actions as they affect him. His disdain for Edna's "peculiar" behavior reifies Léonce as a normative, patriarchal antagonist in the face of Edna's contrary desires. Consequently, rather than an act of respect or support, his offer to pay for Edna's pigeon house is an attempt to extend his control, because owning the house means owning the woman inside.

By comparison, masculinity grants Robert and Léonce spatial liberty that Edna cannot fathom. Léonce, on vacation and at home, moves smoothly between the social club, work, family functions, and his home with Edna. This is also the case for Robert, who, without preamble, is able to move to Mexico, then New Orleans, and back to Mexico again. When Edna begins to fall for Robert on vacation, Chopin presents Robert's ability to move widely as a formative detail about him, noting, "he was always intending to go to Mexico, but some way never got there" (46). Despite this characterization, Robert eventually does make it to Mexico. In order to avoid the complications of an affair with Edna both on vacation and after his sojourn at the pigeon

house, he relocates to a place that satisfies him, whereas Edna returns to her home in New Orleans with no avenues for distracting or appeasing the longing spurred from their unconsummated love. Because they are a fundamental part of his identity within the story, his moves are seamless even though they are punctuated by messy romantic entanglements with Edna. Both Robert and Léonce are able to meet their needs — making money and finding suitable housing — as well as engage exactly to the extent they would like in emotional matters by controlling the spaces they occupy. Furthermore, their mobility ensures that detrimental social repercussions, like the fallout of an affair or divorce, never befall men. Instead, blame falls squarely on Edna's shoulders and she lacks the capacity to sustain herself that her husband and lover possess.

Considering how gender roles continually thwart Edna, superficially, her close friendship with the apparent embodiment of traditional womanhood, Adele Ratignolle, seems paradoxical.

While Edna rebels against traditional feminine roles and expectations, Adele presents as the quintessential “mother-woman,” the Angel of the House.<sup>6</sup> Few scholars dispute this oppositionality between the two women, but there is profound disagreement about the significance of their difference.<sup>7</sup> However, this fixation on their oppositionality tends to commandeer the conversation, and little focus is given to the forces that bind them.

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<sup>6</sup> A term coined by Coventry Patmore in his 1854 poem about his wife, the Angel of the House came to be more broadly understood as a trope embodying the ideals of Victorian womanhood. The Angel was devoted to her husband, a dutiful mother, a graceful hostess, and an emblem of morality.

<sup>7</sup> For example, Katie Berry Frye asserts their friendship foremost exhibits the complex racial dynamics of non-black, racialized bodies in the American south. Privileging the difference between their overwhelmingly gendered lives, Kathleen Streamer instead conceptualizes their differences as metonymic of contemporary feminism in America. And Carolyn Mathews, while relying on slightly more expansive feminist readings of Adele, conceives of Adele as a rolemodel for Edna both in the ways she excels and transgresses gendered standards.

Specifically, there are few analyses that explore the two women's affinity for one another outside of broader political explanations. The two women share a social sphere, but they are drawn together by something stronger than coincidence and convenience. As well as electing to spend time with one another, the two support each other in profound ways. For instance, Adele yearns for Edna when she undergoes a traumatic childbirth. Assuming the place of a supportive partner, Edna does not hesitate to leave the pigeon house, the site of her bliss with Robert, to support Adele. Adele, albeit unwittingly, supports Edna through her emotional turbulence as well. It is through her interaction with hyperbolically domestic Adele that Edna becomes unsatisfied with her domestic life and motivated to reconfigure her home. The narrator observes of Edna while spending time with Adele on the beach:

That summer at Grand Isle she began to loosen a little the mantle of reserve that had always enveloped her. There may have been—there must have been—influences, both subtle and apparent, working in their several ways to induce her to do this; but the most obvious was the influence of Adele Ratignolle. The excessive physical charm of the Creole had first attracted her, for Edna had a sensuous susceptibility to beauty. Then the candor of the woman's whole existence, which every one might read, and which formed so striking a contrast to her own habitual reserve—this might have furnished a link. Who can tell what metals the gods use in forging the subtle bond which we call sympathy, which we might as well call love. (57-58)

The narrator's tone presents Edna as a victim of the spaces she occupies as well as the company she keeps. However, despite this distanced agency, Edna is able to choose to undress herself, metaphorically freeing herself from "reserve," this summer while on vacation. On one hand, removing her "mantle of reserve" suggests Edna becomes more forthcoming and unabashed in her feelings. Lifting a coat off her shoulders releases an emotional burden, allowing her to be more authentic in the ways her body may look or act. However, undressing also leaves her more vulnerable. Without her emotional armor, she is susceptible to forces and feelings she may have previously rebuffed or not noticed. With this in mind, and especially paired with the sexual connotations of disrobing, Edna's gesture points specifically to her dawning sexuality.

Curiously, the narrator goes on to name Adele Ratignolle as the primary catalyst for Edna's new comport. The most "obvious" cause of Edna's personal and sexual revolution is the seeming apogee Victorian womanhood — a demure woman, blissfully devoted to her husband and children. Yet, the narrator explains: "The excessive physical charm of the Creole had first attracted her, for Edna had a sensuous susceptibility to beauty" (57). Although Edna may find Adele attractive despite her different (and, in contemporary context, superior) female experience as a happy wife and mother, it is more likely that Adele's ability to present as a near-perfect embodiment of womanhood is complicit in Edna's attraction. Adele's body attracts Edna at this moment when she is in the midst of changing her understanding of her own. Rather than her wit or humor, Adele's beautiful body "charms" Edna, a term that can have both pleasurable and vexing associations. The narrator goes on to indicate their differences constitute a "bond." Platonically, these differences could be construed as their nearly opposite attitudes

towards domestic life. However, allusions to Adele's beauty, body, and charm suggest an erotic bond between the two. The narrator hedges the bond could be called "sympathy," but then relents: "we might as well call [it] love." In the process of disrobing from her previous reserves, Edna falls in love with Adele, their "striking [...] contrasts" drawing them together.

The erotic love between Adele and Edna is far more explicit and romantic than any sentiments exchanged between heterosexual couples in the story. However, their affection hardly surfaces again in the novel. Even in a plot preoccupied with the contentious boundaries of relationships within spaces, there is simply no place for a homoerotic or homosexual relationship. Especially considering Edna's main tethers to all relationships are varying degrees of sexual desire or obligations informed by her gender, there are no spaces in society — even liminal spaces — that permit, not to mention mandate, women to explore same-gender attraction. By comparison, although no space mandates an extramarital affair between Robert and Edna, their union is within the realm of possibilities because it adheres to heteronormative standards. Heterosexual relationships are more robust in the narrative because they are more easily imagined by the language the narrator employs and the patriarchal framework within which Edna operates..

But the infeasibility of Adele and Edna's relationship does not diminish their bond. After Edna seemingly moved on, transferring her passion to Robert, the two enjoy conjugal bliss in a way impossible for Adele and Edna. After consummating their love in Edna's haphazard "pigeon house," Edna appears at the apogee of happiness and independence. The only force that can pull her away from her renegade home and joyful



love within it is Adele. A servant informs Edna that Adele needs her for a difficult childbirth. Abruptly, she leaves Robert to comfort Adele. However, when she arrives at the Ratignolle apartment, she finds birth has hijacked Adele's charming body. The scene, reacquainting Edna with the most fundamental, physical expectations for a woman, jars her back to pragmatic reality. Sitting beside Adele, Edna "witnessed the scene of torture" (170). Once again, Adele brings to the fore the heteropatriarchal boundaries of Edna's relationships and desires. Edna returns home, sobered, only to find Robert has left her. Called upon by forces beyond her control to do so, witnessing Adele's performance of acute domestic heterosexuality foils Edna's fantastical life with Robert, as well as any imaginary life with Adele.

Abandoned by Robert and alienated from Adele, Edna leaves behind the home that is now contaminated by Robert's rejection and return to the space where she last experienced happiness irrespective of Robert or Léonce, or even Adele. Without the relationships that contextualized her body over the course of the novel, Edna abruptly enters the sea where she learned to swim, becoming immersed in space where her body can act as she pleases. During her initial forays into the ocean, earlier in the novel, her intimacy with Robert grows as he teaches her to swim. Edna enters the lessons skeptical that she will ever feel safe in the water, in this frontier with no negotiated boundaries. In one respect, the lessons are awkward and fruitless; their affection for one another compounds far more on land. However, one night Edna spontaneously urges her social group to go for a swim. She breaks off from the happy couples, bachelors, and widows, going far enough into the sea to feel invigorating separation. Chopin invokes the

language of childhood to describe Edna in the water and confides she “wants to go where no woman has gone before,” although in reality she “had not gone a great distance” (73).

While the porch allows Edna to entertain relationships taboo in other contexts, swimming by herself grants Edna a greater degree of agency over her body than deemed appropriate for a woman. The ocean, like the porch, delineates fewer restrictions for Edna’s behavior because the liminal space of the sea provides the conditions necessary for Edna to feel rejuvenated and free. It offers a natural antagonist to the houses in which Edna must make her home; it is fluid, vast, and explicitly not man-made. Comparatively, traditional female places, such as her own home and the homes of other families, spur anxiety about motherhood and womanhood for Edna. Furthermore, swimming alone at this moment departs from the myriad of uninspiring swimming lessons Edna endures; rather than having her movements dictated by others (usually men) she, in this moment, chooses her own actions and escapes judgement or control from others, both physically and psychologically. However, the oceans grants Edna this autonomy by isolating her, and with this in mind, the liminal space cannot liberate Edna from the burdens and pressures of shore, although it can assuage her anxieties for a time. While swimming, she moves and behaves as she pleases, but she must do so alone, and for only as long as her body can endure the exercise.

Or in the case of Edna’s final foray into the ocean, she accepts the cost of remaining in the only place to grant her social and bodily autonomy. With strokes of calm finality, Edna approaches the water and “when she was there beside the sea, absolutely alone, she cast the unpleasant, pricking garments from her, and for the first time in her life she stood naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun, the breeze that beat upon her,

and the waves that invited her” (174). Absent of places and people to impress expectations upon her, Edna completes the metaphorical disrobing Adele inspired earlier that year, only this time physically stripping away the trappings of what is expected of her body. With the tandem push of the sun and wind and the beckoning of the ocean, Edna, to an even greater extent than after her emotional awakening, cannot go back; she instead, Chopin repeats, goes “on and on.” When her mind reaches for her family in New Orleans, she places them — and herself — in the past and acknowledges, “They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul” (175). Like an increasingly stubborn anchor, physical exhaustion and creeping failure punctuate Edna’s final thoughts of liberty and separation from her family, Robert, and even Doctor Mandelot. The ocean offers her this unprecedented relief from the control of these men and domestic pressures, but, in order to do so, it remains an unsustainable liminal space. She expends her energy moving farther from shore, embracing the ocean no matter what the cost. Out at sea without means of getting to land, her last action is to take in the space that is finally, unabatedly hers and chooses the fate that accompanies its engulfing relief.

Edna’s death by drowning links her to numerous women, real and fictional, who kill themselves by drowning. However, while much of the discussion surrounding Edna’s suicide does acknowledge and incorporate her gender, many scholars oversimplify Edna’s death, essentially understanding it as akin with that of Ophelia in *Hamlet*.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ophelia is the beautiful daughter of Polonius and love-interest of Hamlet. However, after her father’s death, she begins to go mad. She dies in an ambiguous drowning, one advertised as an accident but rumored to be a suicide. The image of Ophelia drowning or drowned in the river is motif for nineteenth-century painters, most notably John Everett Millais.

William Bartley deftly summarizes the dichotomy of interpretation surrounding Edna's death. On one hand, he notes, "Edna's suicide is the despairing act of a spiritually exhausted woman, [and] her failure occupies along a continuum between the tragic [...] and the irresponsible" (724). On the other hand, he notes that others conceive "Edna's suicidal swim is a heroic moment of self-creation and self-possession, even of mythic apotheosis in the high romantic mode" (725). Neither of these readings are wholly convincing because they both rely on a zero-sum conception of agency as well as ignore the crucial significance of choosing to drown in this specific part of the ocean after her unique search for a home. That is, they both rely on hyperbolic social and political context without registering the spaces in which Edna exists.

Ultimately, Edna's swim illustrates the greatest difficulty about entering a liminal space: by definition, it cannot be permanent. The social comfort of the porch and the liberating isolation of the ocean cannot sustain Edna but, in a turn of tragic irony, she returns to spaces that do not suit her needs and desires nevertheless. In fact, Edna's perpetual leaving and entering spaces moves the plot forward, rather than the potentially more obvious catalyst of her dramatic affair with Robert. Furthermore, the oscillation in and out of spaces that steers Edna's trajectory is not of her own choosing. If left to her own devices, Edna yearns to swim farther than any woman and enjoy the pleasure of any relationship she chooses. However, when she enters a space with the potential to be suitably subversive to accommodate her desires for liberty, other forces within and beyond Edna's control work to stabilize normative notions of feminine roles, steering her out of these spaces and back towards the status quo. Put another way, Edna's perpetually

entering and leaving spaces to find relief or flee oppression, respectively, can be understood as a manifestation of trauma.

Cathy Caruth bridges Freud's conclusions in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* with the French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan in her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* to conceptualize how trauma functions in narratives. According to Caruth, Lacan pivots and extends Freud's interpretations of a traumatic dream experienced by one of his patients. The patient dreams his deceased son is alive again, but burning; the son asks whether his father can see that he is burning before the father wakes up. Freud articulates that the dream is the only possible avenue for the father's traumatized mind to reencounter his son's animate form. Lacan, however, argues that the dream grates against the desires of the father's by reifying his son's death. Reflecting on this difference, Caruth summarizes, "If Freud, in other words, suggests that the dream keeps the father asleep, Lacan suggests that it is because the father dreams, paradoxically enough, that he precisely wakes up" (99). The medium of the dream brings to the fore nebulous questions of experience and memory in relation to trauma — although a documented repercussion of trauma, how do dreams work with the trauma itself?

Lacan looks to the father's act of awakening, inherent in all dreams, for some clarity. He argues, Caruth stipulates, "*awakening*, in Lacan's reading of the dream, *is itself the site of a trauma*, the trauma of the necessity and impossibility of responding to another's death" (100). This assertion, extending Freud's conclusions, implicates both the content and the vehicle of the dream in perpetuating trauma. This dual model of trauma explains how both the spaces themselves, as well as the process of moving in and out of them constitute trauma for Edna. In adherence to Freud's original observations of trauma,

Edna moves from place to place, as if driven by a force beyond her control, in search of belonging. But such belonging proves impossible, each place unable to grasp Edna as she cannot grasp herself. That is to say, ironically homophonous in light of Lacan's insight, Edna's "awakening" functions as her original trauma; unintelligible at first, Edna cannot assimilate her new understanding of her existence with the reality of it. In response, she returns again and again to places that validate facets of her awakening. But like a dream, these places are inherently unsustainable, resulting in departure. This departure, like Lacan notes about awakening from a dream, inflicts yet another trauma. Her suicide marks the confirmation that a new ending to Edna's dream proves impossible.

### **When Private Becomes Public**

The title of Edith Wharton's 1905 novel, *The House of Mirth*, refers to Ecclesiastes 7:4, which sternly warns, "The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth" (*Oxford Bible*). In addition to condemning the treacherous duplicity of the superficially shimmering homes and lives of the leisure-class, this lesson more broadly asserts a deterministic correlation between character and space, namely domestic space, that is central to *The House of Mirth*. Furthermore, the strict dichotomies outlined by the didactic claim — wise and foolish, mourning and mirth — manifest just as rigidly in Wharton's work; the protagonist, Lily Bart, must occupy the "charmed circle" or be cast out amongst the churlish "crowd," be a transcendent success or utter failure. Although it may not be "wise," Lily navigates the simultaneously precarious and glamorous sphere of powerful New York cosmopolitans, cycling through the homes of the leisure-class in her pursuit of securing a wealthy husband because she conceives of "dingy" middle- and lower-class homes, like the one she was raised in, as unendurable.

*The House of Mirth* is generally considered to be a novel of manners. Superficially a realist investigation into the social and interpersonal customs of a given social group or class, the novel follows Lily as she entertains courtships and attempts to deal with the social turbulence of her station. However, raising the stakes above those of a mere exploration into an insular culture, the story relates Lily's efforts to remain socially viable as she runs out of money. The solution to this problem for a woman of Lily's upbringing and beauty is, of course, to marry. But such a common solution proves

surprisingly complex and difficult for Lily, as both those around her and she herself seem to sabotage her chances for matrimony.

The generic constraints of *The House of Mirth* do not provide clear answers as to why Lily struggles to marry, but they do clearly indict the failure to do so. Reconciling notions of ownership and space in *The House of Mirth* Linda Watts puts forth this ominous possibility of the genre:

The novel of manners consists of the female character's quest for domestic mastery, a narrative goal typically constructed as the struggle to conduct herself according to gendered protocol, marry a man of suitable socioeconomic status, and culminate her quest by setting up housekeeping for her family. Within these terms, a proper woman will rule the domestic realm or die trying. (Watts 187)

Despite Lily presenting as the apogee of femininity, she fails in respect to all of these objectives. Unmarried, Lily is moored in nearly a decade of regulating her behavior amidst mercurial and powerful people. She toils from party to party in pursuit of the man who will propel her to the logical next step in her life. Put another way, Lily continues to be the guest in pursuit of becoming a hostess. This transformation, as well as most of the facets of "domestic mastery" emanate from the space of a house. It is not new or surprising to locate understanding of a woman's (fictional or otherwise) success in a physical house or to locate her failure in the street, but the straightforwardness of these tropes masks the instability of these structures and the forces that shape and govern them in this novel in particular.



Superficially, Lily Bart adheres to this reverence of the domestic sphere requisite in a novel of manners. She represents the sort of responsibilities and expectations of traditional nineteenth-century marriage as tantamount to success and indicative of security. Because Lily is not married, she lacks a home over which to preside, children to raise, parties to host, and drawing-room to redesign. While she interprets these facts as a paucity, they can also be read as ways in which Lily enjoys remarkable liberty. She travels relatively freely and make decisions based on her desires. However, such freedom does not mean Lily faces fewer expectations and duties as a woman, merely different ones. For instance, she must constantly consider how her actions will be perceived by others because any breach in propriety could ruin her prospects of marriage. Additionally, Lily must work to curate an external appearance that highlights her beauty — but not at the expense of modesty — and position herself strategically in appropriate spaces without making herself conspicuous. Although these calculations and decisions may not register as stereotypical women's work such as raising children and housekeeping, they constitute the gendered labor that Lily must perform to be deemed successful, and they still tether her to the home. In order to perform traditionally gendered labor inside a house, a woman like Lily must strategize successfully to secure a domestic space.

However, the same modern shifts in society that allow Lily greater mobility and liberty to situate herself in high society also complicate her plight to find a home. Lily's spectacular beauty, the trait touted by everyone as her greatest value, simultaneously makes her incompatible with traditional notions of prim and unassuming housewives while also rendering modern homes unsuitable for her. Consequently, Lily perpetually fails to find a home, sometimes due to forces far beyond her control and other times by

seeming self-sabotage. Anne-Marie Evans posits Lily's failures to secure a home in *The House of Mirth* shows "how the female body was increasingly perceived as an extension of public space" (108). Both Lily's female body and modern expectations of private and public spaces are complicit in her decline, but Lily herself is not necessarily at fault.

At no point in the novel does Lily wield power, that is, no financial or social capital, beyond that of being a beautiful woman. Like a spectacle on the street, Lily is foremost something to be looked at. Even in her first feasible, mutual courtship with the prudish and flighty Percy Gryce, its viability is predicated on how Lily appears to Percy. The courtship is successful to an extent because Lily orchestrates their attraction, curating her behaviors and language to suit his supposed preferences. The ruse succeeds until Lily fails to attend church on Sunday morning, instead opting for a walk outside with Selden. Her friend has no obvious reason to be at Bellomont, but frankly tells Lily he has come to see her: "Because you're such a wonderful spectacle: I always like to see what you are doing" (Wharton 66). Selden puts into words the pattern of Lily's relationship to most of her friends and acquaintances. They behold Lily like a precious object; she gives them joy because her beauty transforms everything she does into an alluring spectacle. However, in explaining to Lily what he means, Selden contradicts his initial characterization, also coining Lily an "artist," mixing and painting a masterpiece in the form of her courtship with Percy. In this description, Selden construes Lily as a spectacle curating her own effect, pushing her into the realm of performative. Rather than being viewed and evaluated entirely without consent, Selden muddles her agency and maintains that Lily uses her beauty to manipulate and control others.

Selden's second characterization of Lily as an agent of her appearance seems compelling. When she is not at a social gathering, Lily shops to adorn herself at all costs; keeping up appearances is priceless. In the most extreme example, Lily becomes and surpasses a work of art during the Bry's *tableaux vivants*. Evoking a gasp from the party-goers:

She had shown her artistic intelligence in selecting a type so like her own that she could embody the person represented without ceasing to be herself. It was as though she had stepped, not out of, but into, Reynolds's canvas, banishing the phantom of his dead beauty by the beams of her living grace. The impulse to show herself in a splendid setting — she had thought for a moment of representing Tiepolo's Cleopatra — had yielded to the truer instinct of trusting to her unassisted beauty, and she had purposely chosen a picture without distracting accessories of dress or surroundings. (134)

Wielding her womanly arts that are akin to “instinct,” Lily makes strategic choices to maximize her effect, clearly crafting a performance. By “intelligence” rather than chance, Lily actively “stepped” and seeks to “show herself” while “banishing” elements she does not like in the *tableaux vivants*. These verbs assign Lily control over her perception by others, and show how she ingeniously stages her exceptional beauty as normative in a setting seeking to put singularity on display. Remarkably, through her reserve, Lily transcends the artificiality of such a performance and instead, because her figure is indistinguishable from a piece of art, actualizes herself as a masterpiece. Betraying natural and physical laws, Lily belongs in the luxe setting of the painting. However, this

exceptionalism mirrors her relationship to the elite society she has entertained for years. While undeniably desirable to look at, Lily is fundamentally an outsider entering opulent a space, and she must do work (which must seem effortless) in order to position herself in the right social scene, just as she positions herself on this illustrious canvas.

As evidenced acutely by the *tableaux vivants*, Lily's plight relies on successfully locating the proper setting for her profound beauty. That is to say Lily must pair material considerations with spatial ones to be successful. To be a spectacle necessitates spectators, who can only be found in certain spaces. Therefore, it is not surprising that her thoughts constantly gravitate back to considerations of who will or may witness her, not just what is witnessed. Not only must she be clothed in the appropriate outfit, she attempts to diligently occupy the spaces delineated for her as a single woman (as well as avoiding inappropriate ones, like the Benedick). Places like Bellomont position her away from clear scandal and ensure she will undoubtedly be seen by those who can potentially provide her security.

Of course, visibility without beauty is fruitless, and Lily understands that "beauty is only the raw material of conquest, and that to convert it into success other arts are required" (34). She follows her mother's instructions to the best of her abilities, and even masters the auxiliary "arts" befitting a beautiful woman. Yet, she never reaps the rewards. Considering the crowded society spaces in which Lily appears, Amy Kaplan considers Lily's presence at the *tableaux vivants* metonymic. She observes that "throughout the novel, Lily's identity is described in relation to a background against which she can outline herself, or a mirror in which she can be viewed. Yet each attempt to ignore that dependence contributes to her further decline" (Kaplan 89). Such an

existence echos that of an ornament, a decoration to suit only a certain type of decor. Likewise, Lily relies on being perceived in a particular setting to constitute her standing and identity as an eligible woman. Although she can choose how she dresses and presents herself, because she lacks a domestic space of her own, some crucial part of how others perceive her will always be beyond her control. In order to come across as desirable, Lily must do her best to act properly in spaces regulated by others. Because she is both beautiful and looking for a husband, it is in Lily's best interests to be a spectacle, to be seen by the men (and women) who hold the power to grant Lily the security proffered by a domestic space, even though it also begets vulnerability and objectification.

Such positioning adheres to the strict training Mrs. Bart imparts on her daughter. Beyond setting an ominous precedent of Bart women dying in squalid "holes" of perceived failure, Mrs. Bart instills in her daughter an imperative to prioritize visibility above all. If Lily becomes a glittering ornament, Mrs. Bart reasons, she cannot possibly be dingy. An unhappy housewife, Lily's mother "hated dinginess, and it was her fate to be dingy" (Wharton 35). Motivated by her own failure and by the antithesis of dinginess in Lily's immaculate beauty, she instills the conviction in her daughter that a woman must manicure all things within her control, especially her physical and social appearance to achieve success. To underscore the importance she perceives in opulent domestic spaces, as well as implicitly correlate poverty with suffering and death, in her final words to Lily, her mother desperately reminds her, "People can't marry you if they don't see you—and how can they see you in these holes where we're stuck?" (35). And because dinginess lurks in certain locations, like the places Mrs. Bart has lived, the solution to dinginess must be located elsewhere, at places like Bellomont, which, not by coincidence,

also service Lily with possibilities to marry. Fearfully echoing sentiments of a patriarchal society, she teaches her daughter to be visible because her feminine beauty and charm will secure her a husband, and that marriage will grant Lily a home, a final haven from dinginess.

But in her dogged repudiation of dinginess, Mrs. Bart overlooks the dangers of visibility, which compound in the modern era. It may offer refuge, but being consumed and evaluated by spectators leaves Lily vulnerable. For example, at the apogee of Lily's visibility at the *tableaux vivants* Selden intimates "whole tragedy of her life." Among the gaping mob of admiring men and Gerty Farish, he realizes, "This was the world she lived in, these were the standards by which she was fated to be measured! Does one go to Caliban for a judgment on Miranda?" (135). This indignation about Lily's unfair fate as a spectacle does not inhibit Selden from believing, like the men around him, that Lily beckons him, that her performance connects him to her authentically and uniquely. It is one of many moments during which Selden oscillates between profound connection and alienation from Lily, usually on the grounds of how she appears to him. Joanna Wagner offers a rationale for Selden's, and all men's, erratic attentions towards Lily. Wagner relies on Judith Butler's theory of gender intelligibility, which predicates survival of a body on its ability to be culturally intelligible or visible as the proper gender, as defined by society. It is not that Lily fails to come across as ladylike enough; in fact, it is exactly the opposite. Wagner extends Butler's framework to argue Lily is "ultra-intelligible," that "she is an ideal, an original, a feminine icon of culture that is so known for what her image represents that she is curiously caught in the stage of categories and labels. She is forbidden the privilege of invisibility. Instead, she is relentlessly seen, transfixed in front

of the eye: always apart, always ocular” (Wagner 122). Beyond undermining Lily’s humanity, such visibility begins to explain why a suitable marriage evades Lily.<sup>9</sup> Her beauty in a given setting renders her an exquisite object, and men collect objects throughout the novel; however, the sorts of objects in different sorts of homes varies. Within the homes of the “charmed circle,” the unintelligible loveliness of Lily equates her with the extravagant paintings the gaudy Simon Rosedale hastily purchases to fill his new mansion. His home in many ways is more public than private, furnished with objects to be seen by others and the site of grand parties as he attempts to buy favor among the old guard of New York cosmopolitans. Despite her body’s affinity with this sort of emerging wealthy household, Lily eschews Rosedale and his advances, and instead she yearns for the stately home of Percy Gryce. But traditional homes like his are closed off entirely from view in the novel and only described to be filled with objects like antiquated, “dingy” volumes. Lily, in all her beauty, would be dreadfully out of place in Percy’s life and home, so he instead marries the homely but wholesome Evie Osburg, whose value is not predicated on being seen.

Yet, because Lily cannot escape her own beautiful body, the only potential relief from being “relentlessly seen” and speculated on, and remedy for the misalignment between her beautiful appearance and her desired domestic space, would seem to be changing the backdrop against which her beauty actualizes. However, finding a space that is neither dingy beyond conception nor public beyond privacy proves difficult. Lily

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<sup>9</sup> Anne-Marie Evans, in her discussion of Lily’s beauty, does not engage explicitly with Butler’s theory, but posits “If Lily was less beautiful, less spectacular, like Gerty Farish, her morality and behavior would never be questioned” (120). This assertion adds another dimension to consider the ways in which Lily’s beauty reduces her worth and reinforces the scrutiny she endures.

herself cannot imagine such a space. Seeking solace after her failure with Percy becomes final with the news of his engagement to Evie Osburgh, Lily retreats to Aunt Julia's house. Although she conceptualizes the house as "her own ground," almost every detail of the place "revolts" her. She likens her homecoming to her visit of Selden at the very beginning of the novel, when she consciously trespasses into a building for bachelors, a place of simultaneous friendship and relief as well as antagonism and danger. At Aunt Julia's, Lily considers her stale reputation and resolves that to be invited back into the spaces befitting her image and requisite for her goals, she must reinvent herself — but she does not know how:

There were moments when she longed blindly for anything different, anything strange, remote and untried; but the utmost reach of her imagination did not go beyond picturing her usual life in a new setting. She could not figure herself as anywhere but in a drawing-room, diffusing elegance as a flower sheds perfume. (Wharton 100)

It is not merely that Lily lacks the effort or talents to situate herself outside of the elite society that objectifies her, she cannot conceptualize such an existence because her mother — and the society of which is emblematic — has so carefully taught her to be beautiful and powerless. The series of invitations that propels Lily's life are not just adornment or distraction, but the actual structure itself. And like a plant rooted in a pot, Lily feels as if she naturally belongs in the drawing room, the epicenter of social life, regardless if she begins to wither there.

This problem reframes Lily's plight to be married by teasing out the distinction between the quest for marriage and the quest for a home. Lily does not desire or need the



emotional aspects of marriage, but clamors for the spatial ones. At no point does she bemoan a lack of companionship. Much to the contrary, her interactions with men consistently drain her, because she must summon the appropriate demeanor as they evaluate her like a stock option or a piece of art for potential collection. She gets joy from being perceived as beautiful, but the complications that arise from this, such as Gus Trenor's attentions, plague her. Her anxieties are constantly spatial, and the ruthless interrogation she receives as a spectacle underscores the necessity of a space outside of the public or social gaze that grants Lily control. The only sustainable space Lily can conceptualize is a home of her own. A home would offer Lily the chance to move from the center of attention into the group of spectators, from precariously reliant on a setting to in control of it. Furthermore, the physical, spatial work of traditional housekeeping offers potential reprieve in that it would supplant the exhausting social labor that defines Lily's life as a single woman.

However, certain social and material realities winnow away Lily's options to find a home. For instance, Lily cannot feel powerful in the house she lives in with Aunt Julia because there is already a lady of the house, one with particular practices and standards that feel antiquated and stale to Lily. Her only alternative is to become the lady of her own house, although this proves more difficult than Lily anticipates. Over the course of *House of Mirth*, suitors offer Lily homes that increasingly do not align with her conception of what is proper. These offers signal the changing nature of the home in this cultural moment. In the modern age of speculation, invisible labor, fortunes are both more accessible and precarious. Consequently, people like Percy Gryce marry into another wealthy family to consolidate and maintain their wealth. On the other hand, those

catapulted into wealth, such as Simon Rosedale and the Brys, intently seek out ways to cement their status, reinscribe their presence among, or even above, the historical elite.

Highlighting one aspect of the reconfiguration of homes in the modern era, Kaplan points to Wharton's subversive representations of private and public life, arguing "In *The House of Mirth* it is the dealings of the business world which seem private and unspeakable, while the cultural work of women dominates the public scene" (Kaplan 91). Aligning women with the home comes as no surprise, but emphasizing the broad importance of their labor — done in the private sphere — departs from the absence of such acknowledgement characteristic of eras past. Furthermore, the work credited to women is not stereotypical housekeeping or childcare, but instead is much like the speculative public business their husbands perform. In doing so, Kaplan underscores just how public the private becomes in *The House of Mirth*, destabilizing or blurring a boundary previously rigid. In addition, Kaplan extrapolates from the trajectory of Lily's social life to argue that social activity "was thus gradually moving out of the private dining hall and exclusive ball of the Astor Four Hundred Club to the public state of the hotel and restaurant, where anyone with wealth could come to see and be seen" (Kaplan 91). In turn, homes become more like clubs, as seen in the Brys extravagant mansion and Judy Trenor's desire to add a ballroom to her estate. The overarching effect of these changes means, "the upper-class home functioned less as a private haven from the competition of the marketplace than as the public stage for that competition" (Kaplan 91). Changes of any kind threaten the viability of Lily, the rooted drawing-room flower, but the implications of reinvented home spaces that Kaplan outlines are especially perilous. Because the changing modern home implicitly requires consequent changes in the

woman at the heart of it, her fidelity with the one place Lily believes herself destined is jeopardized. Although it might seem as though Lily, who excels at “being seen” would thrive within increasingly public homes, the changes like those initiated by the Brys and Simon Rosedale necessitate Lily to continue the draining work of putting herself on display. Without relief from the spectators and speculators ushered into modern homes, becoming the lady of such a house would be impossibly taxing, defeating what Lily understands to be the fundamental utility of a private sphere.

Simon Rosedale, in his persistent pursuit of Lily, fails to register her aversion to his kind of home, and instead insists on their similar need to find a home throughout the novel. This detection of kinship disturbs Lily, but it proves to be true. Lily and Rosedale are bound together in their difference: Lily defies acceptance and assimilation due to her unintelligible gender, while Rosedale’s ostensible Jewish character casts him into a similar liminal social existence. As Lori Harrison-Kahan argues, “There is a sense of common interest and shared knowledge between these two characters that links them in their performances of identity” (39). Spurred by their “common interest” to secure themselves among the elite, both Lily and Rosedale attempt to co-opt their marginalized identities into desirable spectacles. They both capitalize on and co-opt the unique tools they have available in hopes of articulating their worth to those who interpret their differences as defects. Per her mother’s training, Lily adorns her body to hyperbolic perfection, whereas Rosedale wields his Jewish wealth to build an undeniably spectacular mansion, filled to the brim with exquisite decorations.

Especially in light of their similar character, Simon Rosedale’s offers of marriage are in many ways Lily’s best option, as he also offers her the material life she desires. He

is an astute businessman who struggles only for social acceptance. As a Jewish bachelor, he desires a wife who will help him pass among the wealthy, white people who control society. Because Lily's appearance, implicitly predicated on whiteness, is her most salient trait to Rosedale and the "charmed circle," she is the ideal candidate to stabilize his identity and mask his Jewishness; as Lori Harrison-Kahan asserts, "Lily can help Rosedale pass by allowing him to be seen with her" (Harrison-Kahan 43). As Rosedale intimates at the *tableaux vivants*, Lily is literally more beautiful than anything his fortune can buy. With Lily at its heart, he believes his house will be construed as a normative, white home. However, Lily's racism prevents her from this imagined future. While not as belligerent in her anti-semitism as her white acquaintances, Lily considers Rosedale "not a factor to be feared—unless one put one's self in his power" (Wharton 16). She can entertain that Rosedale does not impose an outright threat, but is quick to believe a unsavory or dangerous potential is lurking beneath the surface. She does not extend this caution to other men who actually cause her harm, such as Gus Trenor. Her suspicions of Rosedale, therefore, can be pinned to his Jewishness. In turn, Lily conceives of marrying Rosedale as putting "[herself] his power," leaving herself vulnerable, despite the financial security and material comfort he offers. This racist rejection paired with their shared social exclusion render their hypothetical household one of simultaneous spectacle and dinginess, the two things Lily seeks to avoid most.

As the social season comes to an end, Lily's opportunities to mingle with eligible men dwindle. Without any modes to protest the decline, Lily moves from the fringes of the elite to the exterior. To compensate, she seeks out substitutes for her social life, befriending the up-and-coming Gormers, only to move on to the Norma Hatch and

eventually taking on a job as a milner once her old acquaintances sabotage her standing with her friends. Because she has no social capital granting her the ability to speak up for herself, Lily relies on the strategy that previously granted her some sort of success: “Lily tries to counter her conspicuousness not with narrative but instead with more conspicuousness in the right setting, until she reaches the point where she avoids being seen at all.” (Kaplan 97). No more does Lily appear in exquisite ballrooms and parties, instead she rotates through middle-class spaces, like the homes of Gerty and Selden. Once her cousin ousts her from Aunt Julia’s house, Lily locates home in increasingly dingy and anonymous places. Her move into a hotel<sup>10</sup>, and eventually into a tenement links Lily’s teleology with that of the traditional home in modern society.

Lily’s downward progression through spaces situates her in an existence than proves unlivable. No one factor strikes Lily down, but the dizzying accumulation of minute exclusions and breaches eventually mire her in a tenement with no money. On her last night alive, Lily’s inherent dependence on her surroundings inspires a reckoning:

In the mysterious nocturnal separation from all outward signs of life, she felt herself more strangely confronted with her fate. The sensation made her brain reel, and she tried to shut out consciousness by pressing her hands against her eyes. But the terrible silence and emptiness seemed to symbolize her future—she felt as though the house, the street, the world

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<sup>10</sup> Betsy Klimasmith notes that the hotel in Wharton’s work, “indicates that every aspect of the culture may be bought and sold. And significantly, the mobility and rootlessness associated with this commercialization of the home is consistently linked with the hotel” (30). Lily’s sojourn in a hotel signals that home, after losing the (albeit unsatisfactory) tethers of Aunt Julia, becomes strategic and pragmatic.

were all empty, and she alone left sentient in a lifeless universe. (Wharton 321)

In this moment, the temporal separation of nighttime underscores Lily's physical and social separation from the places and people she yearns for. Both her body and mind relentlessly accentuate her hopeless surroundings, which Lily interprets as metonymic of her own fate. As she takes in the emptiness resonating from all of the places she sought fulfillment, the mechanisms which once translated her body into a work of art now mark it as inescapably dingy. She weighs her options and opts to remove herself from a setting, at least in her own mind, by taking an overdose of sleeping medicine. In her final act, Lily resigns herself to the risks of the drug because it offers the most hope for her body — she is both the artist of her death and an unwitting victim of her setting.

Lily chooses to die because she cannot reconcile her squalid setting with her ultra-intelligible radiance. Her upbringing and beauty preclude her from a home like that of homely and humble Nettie Struther, though they also, in this modern moment, disqualify her from the homes of the “charmed circle” This liminal position proves untenable, so Lily, utterly exhausted from her search for the security, instead chooses the reprieve of sleep. Benjamin Carson believes this opaque suicide “suggests that women like Lily at the turn of the century were still struggling to articulate and cope with the knowledge of their paradoxical position within an ideological terrain that was both determined by their material reality and the constantly reproduced ideology of gender in which they lived” (713-714). Such a conflict is not of Lily's making — forces beyond her control, of course, assign worthlessness to the poor and fetishize female beauty — yet she is the one left to cope with this contradiction. It is in fact one that is uniquely modern.

Lily's failed plight to locate a fitting space for her female body, raises questions about the construction of homes for white middle- and upper-class women, settings for bodies like Lily's. Previous generations of British and even American women were steeped in notions of Victorian womanhood, which deemed a proper woman demure and dutiful, while those who transgress boundaries of propriety are "loose women." Lily Bart's effortless beauty and grace would make her a seamless success in this nineteenth century context. Therefore, her failure to find a home signals that modern society configures and imagines the home differently than previous generations. In her book *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life*, Victoria Rosner surveys these changes that create the misalignments in Lily's life, eventually prompting her death. Rosner notes that, like in the case of Lily Bart, "no social institution is more closely tied to the construction and reproduction of gender and sexual identity than the home" (Rosner 14). Yet, though its importance to women remains consistent, the demands and roles of the home do not remain static. As new, "modern" modes of society seize cities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, ushering in new art forms, business practices and nearly everything in between, the home changes too. Rosner says, "more than a backdrop or a symbol for family, the home departs from its Victorian identity as a repository of tradition to become a kind of workshop for interior design and social change" (Rosner 13). Like the increasingly grandiose homes of the wealthy in *The House of Mirth*, homes structurally and socially change to respond to new pressures and meet new aims, both in ways Gilman would likely embrace and could not imagine.

However, the modern home rarely appears to be the engine or instigator of change in modernist fiction or scholarship. Rosner points to the irony that, "if gender is now

understood to be integral to modernist studies, domesticity remains, for many critics, the antithesis of modernism” (Rosner 13). This notion aligns with Rita Felski’s broader observations about the modern. She observes “a pervasive cultural equation of the male with the modern” (Felski 37). In order to ground such a conception, Felski argues the feminine is regarded as “emblematic of a nonalienated, nonfragment identity,” and so, consequently, “woman emerges in these discourse as an authentic point of origin, a mythic referent untouched by the structures of social and symbolic mediation; she is a recurring symbol of the atemporal and asocial at the very heart of the modern itself” (37-38). This reluctance to implicate the modern home manifests in Selden’s reception to the discovery of Lily’s suicide. Despite being in the very hovel Lily finds unlivable, Selden can only conceptualize her death in relation to himself and the spaces they shared. Seeing Lily’s corpse, “he felt that the real Lily was still there, close to him, yet invisible and inaccessible; and the tenuity of the barrier between them mocked him with a sense of helplessness” (Wharton 326). His conception of Lily’s simultaneous presence and absence is impossible; while her body is visible, she is most certainly her most authentic self in this moment. Selden’s puzzling interpretation of the scene stems from his inability to reconcile his “mythic” vision of Lily, unaffected by modern patriarchal society with the dead but still beautiful body. He can only understand Lily’s body, alive or dead, as it relate to him in space, and consequently fails to register any “barrier” beyond those separating him from the object he desires. From his place of spectator of both Lily’s life and death, Selden figures that divide, not the walls that enclose Lily when she dies, as unjust confinement.



### **Alienation Among Progress**

In 1928, Virginia Woolf wrote an introduction for a new World's Best Books edition of *Mrs. Dalloway*. Meditating on the renowned fragmented form of the novel's prose, Woolf considers the relationship between reality and fiction, and whether these align with reality and falsehood respectively. She claims the dizzying composition of her 1925 novel tries to push her representations towards reality, but she denies this makes the novel any more true. The "scraps" of content only constitute meaning in how they come together for the reader. Such is the case, Woolf insists, when considering "that in the first version Septimus, who later is intended to be her double, had no existence; and that Mrs. Dalloway was originally to kill herself, or perhaps merely die at the end of her party" ("An Introduction" 11). This detail hardly seems extraneous — Septimus constitutes a significant portion of the novel, and Clarissa's endurance despite her unhappiness tints the entire narrative. However, Woolf's disclosure solidifies what the continuous, interwoven form of the novel itself suggests; to study either tragic character necessitates analysis of the other, despite the fact their biographies appear to resist pairing. Clarissa Dalloway is a housewife in her fifties, unhappy but undeniably successful by traditional measures of a woman's worth, attempting to reconcile existential anxieties prompted by the advent of her great party that night. Septimus Warren Smith, by comparison, is a veteran of the war afflicted with shell shock. His symptoms are so severe he cannot carry out typical duties of a young man. His wife, Lucrezia, ushers him desperately from doctor to doctor throughout the same day in search of a remedy for both of their sakes. Clarissa and Septimus never meet, but are bound together in their parallel attempts to situate their

gendered bodies in a home that brings them relief from the shifting, alienating realities of modern society.

Speaking of other writers' creative teleology, Woolf describes a process that entails "to make a house and then inhabit it, to develop a theory and then apply it" (12). In writing *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf did the opposite. To rely on her own analogy, in both versions of the novel, death and domesticity are to furnish the story. How Woolf houses these themes, with Septimus or not, may seem starkly different, even oppositional, but in both configurations the kernel of the story remains constant. This is not to argue that Septimus' presence makes no difference, but rather to implicate and underscore the high stakes of modern domesticity even in lives that superficially may seem wildly disparate.

At first, Clarissa Dalloway appears to move into the bustling modern city with ease. Deciding to get the flowers herself, she hardly seems like one of those women who Woolf famously described, "have sat indoors all these million of years." She makes this choice presumably because she wants to, because the errand will bring her joy. As she makes her way through the streets, she notes the details of the world around her, both tangible and tacit, to create a hypnotic, immersive portrait of the city. The rapturous composition signals Clarissa's enthusiasm for the city; the love of her errand is rooted in her desire to be among the commerce, people, and urban infrastructure. In one sense, this aligns Clarissa with a flâneur figure, to whom, as Rosner characterizes, "even the most depraved aspects of the city have a romance. The city seduces, entertains, and inspires the urban subject" (147). Identifying Clarissa with the flâneur figure grants her liberty to

determine the places she goes and, at the very least, not stick out when she travels through town.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, the comparison marks Clarissa as urban and modern.

At the same time, however, Rosner acknowledges that “Women fit uneasily into the role of *flâneur*, one molded according to the experiences and habits of male city dwellers who circulate in the public sphere” because the street may pose potential physical danger for women and women are not afforded the requisite invisibility of the quintessential *flâneur*, as they are consistently subjected to the gaze of others (147-148). Clarissa, for instance, runs into her friend Hugh Whitbread on her journey. Illustrating her simultaneous affinity and disjunction with the role of *flâneur*, she answers her friend’s inquiry as to destination by instead responding “I love walking in London” (Woolf 6). Her words reinforce her romantic attachment to exploring the city by foot. Yet, having to utter them at all to Hugh undermines the invisibility inherent to a true *flâneur*. Instead, Clarissa must explain her placement in the public, justify her outing to this man and engage with him in polite conversation about her upcoming party, the traditional topic in which to engage a woman.

But even before Clarissa is seen by Hugh, she struggles to integrate herself in the fabric of the city she loves to witness, suggesting a discord between Clarissa and the modern city. Over the course of her outing, the conventionally contrived public sphere deflates Clarissa’s sense of expansive liberty that it offers male *flâneurs* and becomes a regulating force, propelling her back into the private sphere. This shift is first signalled by her response to the symphony of urbanity. As relayed by the narrator, Clarissa, as if to

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<sup>11</sup> Sarah Clement and Ching-fang Tseng provide further analyses of Clarissa as a *flâneur*. Clement compares Clarissa Dalloway to other twentieth century female characters who explore the public sphere, while Tseng delves further into the domestic implications for Clarissa as a result of her public life.

quell an unvoiced sense of separation, seeks to convince herself that she belongs within this public space: “And she, too, loving it as she did with an absurd and faithful passion, being part of it, since her people were courtiers once in the time of Georges, she, too, was going that very night to kindle and illuminate; to give her party” (Woolf 5). Repeating her place in relation to the other other urbanites, as if to remind herself she shares a community with them, Clarissa tethers her affection for the city to that of the broader public, predicating her feelings on the sentiments of others. In a way, this move protects Clarissa; if she is just like the people around her, she is less vulnerable. However, her affection for the city is also simultaneously “absurd and faithful,” self-deprecating and perfectly dignified. Lacking the ability to discern whether she stands out or blends in, Clarissa reaches for historical and domestic rationales to validate her feelings rather than toward the capricious crowds surrounding her. Just as soon as she positions herself among the public, her own mind reconfigures her feelings about the stimulus around her until it lands on the party. Though she walks among them at this moment, she will remove herself eventually, to “give her party” for a select coterie. It only makes sense for Clarissa to “be a part of it” if she can pin her participation to her social status and domestic work appropriate for a woman. Like all of the other women in the novel, Clarissa only ventures into public to shop; gender roles commandeer her moment of liberty. Hugh then arrives to further distinguish Clarissa from the city surrounding her, reinscribing the party as the place for her instead of wandering the streets. On one hand, Hugh’s intervention to reassert Clarissa’s fidelity with domestic life can be read as a menacing, patriarchal coercion. Yet, on the other hand, Clarissa also consigns herself to

party-giving. Both of these moves, while restrictive, also underscore the security and protection of a luxurious home like Clarissa's.

After her errand, Clarissa does not linger or consider exploring like her daughter, Elizabeth,<sup>12</sup> does during the day. Instead, she returns to the space demarcated for her: the home. Rosner offers that perhaps, "The home offers a possible antidote or counterbalance to the dangers of the street; it extends a sheltering retreat from the shock and dissonance or urban life" (Rosner 147). However, when Clarissa reenters the home, the supposed refuge becomes a stressful marketplace, a space where — immediately confronted with a snub from Lady Bruton — she can only think of comparison, inadequacy, and lost love. Once informed of the invite extended only to her husband, Clarissa can only register dissonance prompted by her home. Consequently, she attempts to move herself away from the domestic bustle to find the supposed stillness of home. She goes upstairs to her attic bedroom to continue her rest treatment, prescribed years ago to treat depression brought about by her sister's death:

"Like a nun withdrawing, or a child exploring a tower, she went upstairs, paused at the window, came to the bathroom. There was the green linoleum and a tap dripping. There was an emptiness about the heart of life; an attic room. Women must put off their rich apparel. At midday they must disrobe." (Woolf 31)

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<sup>12</sup> Though I do not focus on Elizabeth Dalloway in this project, Clarissa's daughter, is often considered a lens through which Clarissa can be better understood. As Shannon Forbes asserts, "Elizabeth is Clarissa's possession to mold and shape" and while she "contemplates performing a role very different from that of a perfect hostess, [...] several instances throughout the novel show how similar she is to Clarissa" (46).

Her search for peace within her home is inescapably female, informed by gender roles which stipulate women are the heart of the home. Despite her apparent mobility, Clarissa is grouped with two figures utterly isolated from the very public sphere. A nun's social withdrawal from society and a child's retreat to the highest point in a house share the desire to create the greatest separation possible between the self and society, be it social or physical. Both lead bounded existences, but generally for the greater good; their quarantines reap some benefit or serve a pragmatic purpose. In this moment, Clarissa is in search of her reward for being cloistered in her home.

Instead of redemption or vindication, however, Clarissa only finds a leaky faucet and empty rooms, defects and absences. She feels "an emptiness about the heart of life" that conjures up thoughts of the attic, an obscure and windowless room that stands in opposition to the archetypal "heart" of the home such as the hearth or drawing room. This subversion at once casts Clarissa into the traditional role of Angel of the House while also suggesting some part of Clarissa or her home is not well, or is even backwards. Relying on the most trite conception of home, the rooms through which she travels should instill satisfaction and comfort, yet they only prompt alienation. Rather than refuge, Clarissa only finds structural disappointments within her home.

Even for modern women like Clarissa, who enjoy the seeming freedom to venture into urban public life, the health of the home is equated with the woman at its "heart." The connection between the home the homemaker is so obvious the narrator need not mention it, and rather moves to trace how, when she retreats from tangible markers of modern society, tacit societal forces still plague Clarissa within her house. Although no one is watching, when Clarissa returns home, her actions adhere to gendered customs,

rather than to suit her desires. For example, her decision to “disrobe” is not accredited to her own volition — it is simply because she is a woman and “women must disrobe.” In doing so, Clarissa yields to this societal assertion of gender roles, revealing how patriarchal expectations punctuate her life — like the resounding ring of Big Ben throughout the novel — as well as regulate her body within the spaces delineated as feminine. Furthermore, this particular allowance, to “disrobe,” signals an acute vulnerability Clarissa endures in order to properly fulfill her role as a socialite and housewife: it is her womanly duty to reconfigure herself.

Neither the public nor private spheres feel quite like home to Clarissa, and this existential discomfort, this inability to feel at home, binds her to Septimus Warren Smith. Both characters fail to feel entirely satisfied in the place modern, post-war society prescribes to them. After taking part in the First World War, Septimus returns home to London with his young Italian wife, Rezia. However, for Septimus, leaving war for home does not mean finding peace. On the surface, Septimus has the makings of virile hero, he fails to play out the cultural myth of the triumphant veteran, returning home victorious and energized with patriotic zeal. Rather, Septimus is emblematic of the tragic reality most veterans faced. As Septimus does, most soldiers struggled to assimilate after witnessing and committing horrors at war. Plagued by low self-esteem, survivor’s guilt, physical disability and shell-shock, the remnants of troops found themselves discordant with the society awaiting them back home. Although manifest in myriad ways, the fundamental lack of belonging created what Tiffany Joseph describes as a culture of “hostility, uncertainty, and insecurity” among World War I veterans and civilians, especially in regards to reassuming (or reimagining) gender roles (66). The war was an

acute moment of social turbulence in the midst of a broader transformation, and, as a result, Joseph asserts, “not only was it becoming increasingly difficult to perform gender ideals, it was becoming increasingly unclear what that performance should look like” (66). War compounded the changes already destabilizing society, altering the homeland and the combatants so significantly that soldiers could not simply resume their previous existences; they had to somehow integrate their changed minds and bodies into a radically different post-war society.

Septimus Warren Smith’s experience embodies the radical change of both society and the man over the course of the war. Before 1914, he showed promise in business and when the time came to do his patriotic duty, “Septimus was one of the first to volunteer” (Woolf 86). Furthermore, “He gives off the appearance one of those half-educated, self-educated men whose education is all learnt from books borrowed from public libraries, read in the evening after the day’s work, on the advice of well-known authors consulted by letter” (Woolf 84). In other words, he was an archetype of exceptional middle-class English masculinity. But rather than war experiences reifying chivalric traits like strength, bravery, and cunning, Joseph tells how soldiers “often found themselves reduced to anonymous bodies in trenches, where life and death seemed the result of dumb luck” (65). Warfare, in reality, proved terrifyingly capricious and brutally random. As a result, returning veterans felt exhausted and undercut rather than fortified and victorious. Septimus’ crippling shell shock symptoms highlight the war’s crippling effect. His potential as young man becomes hijacked by hallucinations, delusions, and hyperactive sensory processing. Septimus himself never connects his fraught life to trauma from the war, but his wife, Rezia, is acutely aware of the effect of fighting. Confronted with



Septimus' first utterance of "cowardly" suicidal thoughts as they wander the streets of London, Rezia can only exclaim in her own mind "but Septimus had fought; he was brave; he was not Septimus now." (23). Her lack of recognition stems from Septimus' deterioration; because he is suicidal and therefore no longer the "brave," mythic picture of British masculinity, she cannot configure him as the same man she married. Even before becoming a soldier, Septimus embodies the ideal British man,<sup>13</sup> but, in a project paralleling the gradual shifts made towards women's liberation during the same period, the war that promises to reinscribe or even bolster his masculine value to society instead renders him incompatible for civilian life. As evidenced by his inability to carry out the gendered expectations of his marriage to Rezia, the war reconfigures both Septimus and society, but the two resulting figures are incompatible.

In the same way, home for Septimus is both the fundamental reason for his suffering and the only place he can hope for relief. Military involvement on the basis of patriotism relies on notions of home as a sacred hearth. Furthermore, those who, like Septimus, opt to defend their homeland implicitly assert themselves as part of the national community; they are stakeholders who believe their home warrants sacrifice and that risking their well-being is worth the payoff of a safe country. No man would freely risk his life to protect a country that, in other ways, he does not expect to protect him. However, for Septimus, home (in multiple senses of the word) fails to protect and

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<sup>13</sup> Like the beginning of any Bildungsroman, before the war, Septimus leaves his small hometown to find work in London. He dreams of becoming a poet, but settles for a job as a clerk at an auctioneer house. Despite his uninspiring profession, he capitalizes on the infrastructure instituted over the course of the nineteenth century aimed at social betterment, such as informative periodical publications and public lectures. Kathryn Van Wert studies Septimus' early life and draws connections between his Victorian-influenced working-class identity and his experiences of trauma after the war.

account for him in his shattered state. As Madelyn Detloff contends, “the flipside of being prepared to die for one’s country is one’s duty to live even a miserable life for it” (158).

Septimus’ civilian life is indeed miserable, plagued by alienation as a result of his shell shock. His ability to live a remotely normative life is compromised by his disorder. For example, after a stately motor car makes a explosive sound, startling all those in the street and in surrounding shops (including Clarissa Dalloway), Septimus appears unfazed by the noise, but is disquieted by the ominous car itself and the unusual reactions it elicits from the curious crowds. Revealing simultaneously his disconnect with reality and the severity of his fatalism, Septimus gets the sense he is on the brink of an apocalypse: “The world wavered and quivered and threatened to burst into flames. It is I who am blocking the way, he thought. Was he not being looked at and pointed at; was he not weighted there, rooted to the pavement, for a purpose? But for what purpose?” (Woolf 15). Everything from the integrity of the earth to his own placement feels precarious and out of Septimus’ control. Yet, paradoxically, he deems himself responsible for a problem — the delayed motorcar and consequent crowd — with which he has nothing to do. In reality, Septimus is an anonymous man on an essentially mundane urban street; on the surface, he should be equipped to be the charmed flâneur that evades Clarissa’s capabilities. Instead, however, he understands himself to be the complete opposite; rather than seamlessly traveling through the urban world, he obstructs public life to the point of destruction of it and him. Post-war Septimus, the veteran with shell shock, is not compatible with the industrial, crowded London. As the narrator remarks as Rezia desperately escorts her husband to Dr. Bradshaw, “London has swallowed up many

millions of young men called Smith” (84). Septimus Smith proves no different, utterly unable to survive within the capital city — the public — he suffered to protect.

In addition to floundering within the public sphere, Septimus fails utterly to meet the demands of a Englishman’s private life. As Dr. Holmes patronizingly tells Septimus, “ Didn't [his behavior] give her a very odd idea of English husbands? Didn't one owe perhaps a duty to one's wife?” (92). As great or even greater than Holmes’ concern for Septimus’ physiological health is his concern for Septimus’ social health. He is a normative force, employing condescension and shame in hopes of prodding Septimus to act like the meritorious veteran society expects, namely as a dutiful husband. This means foremost to be the leader of his household — to provide materially for his wife and supply her with children. And while Septimus has managed to secure a wife, she is a foreigner and consequently excluded from the London social scene. His failure creates failure for Rezia in the sense she is too busy surveilling her husband to possibly dream of throwing a party or performing other female duties that she desires.

Yearning for a traditional English marriage, even in the face of a suffering husband, Lucrezia longs for children. She tells her husband, “she must have children. They have been married five years” (89). Barring extraordinary circumstance, having children is a requisite for the normative English marriage, and their barren marriage encroaches on taboo. And unlike Septimus’ neuroses, the lack of children presents itself as a domestic problem with a simple solution. However, rather adopting the standard interest in having children, or at the very least begrudgingly satisfying his wife’s wishes, Septimus virulently maintains that “the business of copulation was filth” (89). Denying this central facet of a heterosexual home (one even present in Clarissa’s chaste, unhappy

partnership), breaks the spirit of Rezia. Septimus does not bring his wife to tears when he threatens suicide, but rather drives her over the edge when he denies her children. In response to his wife's heartbreak "he felt nothing; only each time she sobbed in this profound, this silent, this hopeless way, he descended another step into the pit" (90). The devastation of his wife stirs nothing in him, solidifying his failure as a husband. But this failure is not novel and appears to have no impact on Septimus, as he interprets this moment as merely one along his predestined, apocalyptic teleology.

One of the only structures that interrupts Septimus and Clarissa's melancholy is windows, because their materiality and transparency allow access to the world in a fashion that simultaneously grant security and invites vulnerability. They provide a literal buffer between the viewer and the subject, while granting them complete visual access. However, being in front of window allows them to be viewed, speculated upon, in the same way. Windows connect spaces to one another visually, granting access to see in or out. However, this access is bounded; the panes of glass are not permeable and are still stubborn material divisions — violating this boundary requires violence. In light of these characteristics, windows are a useful metaphor in to mediate the experiences of Clarissa and Septimus, who live adjacent "double" existences while attempting to reconfigure environments that oftentimes feel beyond their control. Allan Johnson discusses how *Mrs Dalloway* does this work on a broader level, arguing that it "meditates on images of doors and windows in its attempt to reconcile a particularly anxious appreciation of the past with a new, post-war interest in the visible, the touchable and the knowable" (213). Windows connect disparate, even oppositional, moments and environments without

necessitating confrontation or mutual exclusivity. As a result, they become sites of liminality for both Septimus and Clarissa.

For Clarissa, windows are a welcome aberration from the unsatisfactory binary of private and public, although one that offers no permanent relief for her lack of satisfaction. While she roams the streets on her way to buy flowers, store windows of all sorts beckon her with their goods. She pauses at the fishmongers, not because she needs fish, but because the window presents an options; it gives her a small but sufficient space to demonstrate agency. Without consequence, the window grants Clarissa a socially appropriate moment to evaluate her choices. Albeit on a minute scale, the window gives Clarissa a way to change her life, which is the greatest relief imaginable in the course of her life that oftentimes frivolous, fleeting, and wasted. This comfort never threatens to actually alter the course of her life. The window after all only grants the representation of the change, not the change itself. Despite the limits of the window, it can be transformative, and it also protects Clarissa. When, moments after contemplating the fish, Clarissa is shopping for flowers at Miss Pym's, both she and the shopkeeper are drawn to the other side of a store window to trace the exploding noise coming from the street. The pane grants the two women physical protection from the dangers of the city street. Restriction from this sort of phenomenon is of course a welcome function of the window. In doing so, the barrier allows the two women to continue their apropos labor, selecting flowers for the party.

Within her home, windows similarly grant Clarissas fleeting acquaintances with liberty, while also reifying her literal and existential confinement. Each time Clarissa gazes out of a window in her house, she situates herself in another space or time. As she

ascends the stairs “like a nun” upon returning home from the florist, the only exceptions from the litany of disheartening rooms surrounding her are the brief spaces that allow Clarissa gaze out of windows. As she looks outside, a unspecified sense of “knowing” seizes her:

She knew, and felt it, as she paused by the open staircase window which let in blinds flapping, dogs barking, let in, she thought, feeling herself suddenly shrivelled, aged, breastless, the grinding, blowing, flowering of the day, out of doors, out of the window, out of her body and brain which now failed, since Lady Bruton, whose lunch parties were said to be extraordinarily amusing, had not asked her. (Woolf 30)

Thinking, feeling and knowing all at once, Clarissa grapples for ways of experiencing her reality as framed in the window. She remains indoors because she was left out of Lady Bruton’s lunch, but also because she chose to marry Richard, to give her party, and go through the motions of traditional domesticity. In presenting Clarissa with the dynamic and violent modern world, the window “lets in” all of the forces and things from which Clarissa is removed in her home. Confronted by the simultaneously destructive and creative, the “grinding” and “flowering,” forces of the world outside her window, Clarissa “suddenly” conceptualizes herself as unsexed and repulsive. Rather than a sense of liberation or hope, the society beyond her home threatens Clarissa. The modern forces framed by the window undermine the assurances Clarissa relies on to affirm her marriage to Richard and domestic work; rendering her “shrivelled, aged, breastless,” they deny her gender presentation and subsequent desirability from which women, including Clarissa, are taught to derive their worth.

At a later moment looking out the window, the collision of Clarissa's lackluster domestic existence with the lives of those outside once again destabilize her conception of herself. When Elizabeth leaves to go out with Miss Kilman, Clarissa feels insecure and yells at her daughter to remember her party — indicative of her mother's worth — to no avail. Left alone to prepare, Clarissa's jealousy and insecurity bleed together as she stands before the window. Frozen, she looks out the window and into the house next door where she sees an older woman climbing stairs, just like she herself did earlier, and thinks, "Somehow one respected that—that old woman looking out of the window, quite unconscious that she was being watched. There was something solemn in it—but love and religion would destroy that, whatever it was, the privacy of the soul" (126-127). In comparison to the feckless Miss Kilman, Clarissa deems this anonymous woman, carrying on with her domestic duties and looking out her window, respectable. Of course, Clarissa is doing precisely the same things and fostering the same privacy in her home. Age vaguely separates the two women, but in a sense Clarissa projects herself out of the window. However, unlike Septimus, her projection is not violent or destructive; it is one of solidarity rather than alienation. The ring of Big Ben cements the bond. The sound inspires the older woman to move away from the window, just as Clarissa acts in accordance with these same patriarchal structures embodied by the imposing, relentless clock. She, too, is unconscious of being watched (read) and feels the pressing threat of modernity in nebulous manifestations of "love and religion," the sorts of things Miss Kilman values. Through the window, Clarissa is able to see hope for herself in the woman's existence as well as hopelessness. If she continues to move through time,

becoming this woman, nothing will change, it seems, which is both a relief and unbearable.

And just like the window grants Clarissa visual access to this anonymous older woman, it structurally connects her to Septimus as she reflects about his death while looking once again at her neighbor during her party. When Dr. William Bradshaw mentions the tragic end of his patient, Clarissa moves into a room alone. Unsurprisingly, this isolation fails to soothe Clarissa so she turns once again to the window facing her neighbor. Now the woman's activities depart starkly from Clarissa's, but instead of finding the dissonance disturbing, Clarissa appears unperturbed and even heartened by the divergence of her home life and her neighbor's. Mesmerized, Clarissa's vantage point allows her to reconcile her life with Septimus' suicide:

It was fascinating, with people still laughing and shouting in the drawing-room, to watch that old woman, quite quietly, going to bed. She pulled the blind now. The clock began striking. The young man had killed himself; but she did not pity him; with the clock striking the hour, one, two, three, she did not pity him, with all this going on. There! the old lady had put out her light! the whole house was dark now with this going on, she repeated, and the words came to her, Fear no more the heat of the sun. She must go back to them. But what an extraordinary night! (186)

In contrast to earlier in the day, this stint at the window renews Clarissa's sense of self. She does not change radically or discover anything new about herself; instead, she sees other people differently. First, her elderly double appears to live a solitary and peaceful existence, ignorant of the bash going on next door. But rather than incite anxiety, this



departure reassures Clarissa. Although the window in a sense confines her to the chaos and pressures of her party, it now lets in the possibility of eventual peace. Her life, like that of her homebody neighbor, may not always be animated by parties, Big Ben, or other forces that may feel pervasive, but it could be good enough. Septimus' death also fails to disconcert Clarissa and she feels no melancholy. In this moment when she does not pity herself, she does not pity Septimus. With "all this" happening because of her, because she feels productive and validated by the success of her party, she cannot entertain the disappointment and alienation of Septimus' suicide. In fact, as she puts it later, "[Septimius] made her feel the beauty; made her feel the fun" (186). The window allows Clarissa to consider death, but it also presents her with an image of a viable future.

The same buffer Clarissa encounters to mixed results isolates Septimus utterly. Rather than granting him an expansive viewpoint literally or metaphorically, windows reinforce the boundaries erected by his shell shock. When passing the same store windows that provide Clarissa with flitting bouts of liberty, Septimus sees the goods and can only think: "Beauty was behind a pane of glass. Even taste (Rezia liked ices, chocolates, sweet things) had no relish to him" (86). He cannot even register the aesthetic and material value of the goods in the store windows, denying him any relationship to them in the first place. Whereas Clarissa's alienation from the objects in the windows spawns from a sense of obscured agency, Septimus' dissociation seems more entrenched. The window, while highlighting so desirable, only serves to compound Septimus' sense of separation; things that *should* be within reach, especially for a strapping young veteran, are denied to him by invisible confines of his shell shock.

When he returns home, the windows in private become the only potential source of relief as Septimus finds himself unable to inhabit the spaces winnowed down for him. While waiting in his room for the menacing and patronizing Dr. Holmes, Septimus calmly decides to leave life. Embodying Felseki's modern trope of the "feminized male," an insidious parody of a man who "does not represent masculine values of rationality, utility, and progress; feminine, yet profoundly unnatural" (Felski 101). He makes what are traditional womanly considerations about his death: he worries about ruining a prized knife or starting an excessive gas fire. These thoughts are "unnatural" because they are un-gendering. Just as Septimus fails to live up to gendered expectations of society throughout the day, his feminized approach to death eschews any reading as a honorable martyrdom. As well as rhetorically pulling Septimus closer to Clarissa, his feminized death can be read as both a masculine and feminine failure. Consequently, the modern forces that propel him out the window must be understood as indiscriminately pervasive, affecting the lives of those with prominent trauma as well as those whose suffering is imperceptible,

In order to escape the hyperbolic claustrophobia of rest treatment, of the greatest isolation imaginable, Septimus takes the only structural exit available to him. It is not his first choice, therefore, but, in Septimus' mind:

There remained only the window, the large Bloomsbury lodging house window, the tiresome, the troublesome, and rather melodramatic business of opening the window and throwing himself out. It was their idea of tragedy, not his or Rezia's (for she was with him). Holmes and Bradshaw like that sort of thing. (He sat on the sill.) But he would wait till the very

last moment. He did not want to die. Life was good. The sun hot. Only human beings—what did they want? Coming down the staircase opposite an old man stopped and stared at him. Holmes was at the door. "I'll give it you!" he cried, and flung himself vigorously, violently down on to Mrs.

Filmer's area railings. (Woolf 149)

Leaving life becomes equivalent to leaving the room. Septimus notes that windows are not intended for such purposes, but the places his body is able to exist after the war dwindle until he feels obligated violate this threshold, even if it entails irrevocable destruction. On the other side of the window, Septimus does not see a comforting double of himself in the older man like the old woman who inadvertently comforts Clarissa. Rather, the older man rejects communion with Septimus by “staring,” assessing a man clearly different from himself. Within the house, Septimus recognizes the difference logics between himself and the condescending pre-war doctors who fail to understand, or even acknowledge, the reconfiguration of the world due to the violence of World War I. On both sides of the window, by representatives of both the past and future, Septimus faces hostility and alienation, so it is no surprise he feels like he must shatter it.

Both Septimus and Clarissa are nostalgic for relationships in their pasts, specifically relationships that — at least in hindsight — allowed them both to be authentic, loved, and not alienated from their bodies. In their concurrent experiences of isolation and dissatisfaction, Septimus and Clarissa yearn for aspects of these comforting past relationships before the war, and spending time engaging with their memories suspends their involvement in their unsatisfactory present, putting them in touch with times they truly felt at home. Although peacetime in many ways is preferable for both

characters, and most English citizens, the pressure to singularly feel victorious zeal after the war, maintaining things are better now and “worth” the sacrifices, collapses the space to reconcile the inevitable complexities spurred by the war.

Nobody in the novel feels this claustrophobia imposed by modern England more acutely than Septimus. A particularly alarming manifestation of his shell shock is the recurring hallucination that his officer and friend, Evans, is nearby as Septimus moves about his day, right across the threshold watching over his friend. During the war, the two men “had to be together, share with each other, fight with each other, quarrel with each other,” forming a caring bond in the midst of unimaginable violence. Yet, despite the gravity of their relationship, the front and post-war London fail to make space for Septimus to grieve Evan’s death at the very end of the war; rather than feelings the injustice and sadness of this loss, “Septimus, far from showing any emotion or recognising that here was the end of a friendship, congratulated himself upon feeling very little and very reasonably. The War had taught him” (86). The war dashes emotion in order to mechanize men, and when Septimus loses his friend, being a good soldier, he sublimates his feelings entirely.

In Septimus’ shell-shocked outlook on London, without the same sort of constant violence, Evans seems to crop up literally but in a way still fundamentally inaccessible. Hallucinations of his friend appear just beyond the spaces in which he himself exists. In the streets, Evans appears to Septimus behind trees and in flowers bed; at home, Evans hovers just beyond the balcony railings. This stubborn parallel existence of Evans (and the rest of “the dead in Thessaly”) with Septimus symbolizes the forced stratification between his life and the mourning of others’ deaths. The two, the war taught him, cannot

coexist, yet Septimus is tortured by their concurrence in his mind. Because of the war, remembering Evans cannot be extricated from social behavior; predominant normative doctrines about war, especially the lives and deaths of soldiers, deny Septimus nostalgia and instead pathologize his recollections. Though they serve much the same purpose within his own psyche as Clarissa's memories of her younger years at Bourton, because Septimus' woeful recollections are of a time severed from public recognition, to his post-war society, they are a symptom of Septimus' disorder, rather than its own.

Modern England also denies Clarissa spaces to be happy and fulfilled, instead sequestering her in cloistered home or public spaces explicitly tied to the domestic sphere. However, society is far more accommodating of her memories because nostalgia becomes apropos of the private sphere as modern life becomes increasingly mechanized, fragmented, and chaotic. Felski frames this public shift with an equal and opposite domestic reconfiguration. She explains how, "Nostalgia, understood as a mourning for an idealized past, thus emerges as a formative theme of the modern: the age of process was also the age of yearning for an imaginary edenic condition that had been lost" (Felski 40). Within this framework, Clarissa's nostalgia for happier and simpler times could be construed as a result of her female positioning in respect to the modern world; she is a dutiful steward of the idyllic past, fostering a "redemptive haven for those fleeing the chaos and instability of the modern world" within her home (Felski 41). However, her masterful domestic achievements that, to others, conform to modern expectations fail to create a "haven" for Clarissa herself. In giving her party to the most important men and women, it is necessary for her to deprive herself under these conditions of modern domesticity.

She oversees the transformation of her home from her personal domain into a space foremost to please others. In the face of this sacrifice, it is no wonder she oscillates between obsessing over the risk involved in giving a party — acutely feeling the insecurity of her home — and transporting herself at sporadic intervals to memories of her time at Bourton with Sally and Peter. As she moves about the streets and within her home, “She could remember scene after scene at Bourton” (Woolf 6). In the face of such invisible and thankless labor and risk, nostalgia serves as recourse for her present day alienation. Due to their stark contrast, her bucolic memories of freely loving Sally and Peter displace Clarissa from her present station as a hostess. Though these memories haunt Clarissa in similar way to how Evans recurs to Septimus, rather than a hallucinations that can only reinforce dissolution and estrangement, they grant her a sort of mobility that modernity denies her as a woman as well as providing relief from the turbulent spaces she inhabits.

With this mechanism in mind, it comes as no surprise that the only aspects of giving her party that grant Clarissa pleasure are the access it grants her to Sally and Peter, who are tangible reminders of the tacit pleasure evoked by Clarissa’s nostalgia. Sally and Peter hold Clarissa in mirrored reverence, and attend her party with shared aim of catching a glance at the magnificent Clarissa they both loved. As Sally looks around, she questions the reality of the people around her, attempting to reconcile her memories of them with their present incarnations: “Was it Peter Walsh grown grey? Lady Rosseter asked herself (who had been Sally Seton). It was old Miss Parry certainly—the old aunt who used to be so cross when she stayed at Bourton. Never should she forget running along the passage naked, and being sent for by Miss Parry! And Clarissa! Oh Clarissa!

Sally caught her by the arm” (181). Although the party shows Sally (and Clarissa) that her friends have changed in body, name, and demeanor, something essential remains perfectly coherent, as signalled by Clarissa’s physical presence at the very moment Sally’s memory reaches for her. Clarissa can access her love, and the comfort it brought her, in the physicality of Sally in a way Evans was never accessible to Septimus after the war. On one hand, the party confirms the inevitability that these friends can never have the bliss they once enjoyed — Sally must return to her mundane domestic life, Septimus’ death rattles Clarissa, and Peter ultimately cowers back to India — and that the world has irrevocably transformed. On the other, by bringing them all into the same sheltered, domestic space, it also reinvigorates all three friends. Despite failing to meet the romanticized perfection as nostalgia conveys, encountering each other’s bodies, even if they now have grey hair, nourishes and reaffirms their love, from which they derive purpose beyond their work.

This is the reason Clarissa lives on and gives her parties. When considering the death of Septimus, a fact that propels her to the outskirts of her party, she feels intensified empathy with the man, but ultimately “feels no pity.” She reenters the crowd because, while insufferable most of the time, her modern domestic existence also grants her access to happiest memories:

She had once thrown a shilling into the Serpentine, never anything more. But he had flung it away. They went on living (she would have to go back; the rooms were still crowded; people kept on coming). They (all day she had been thinking of Bourton, of Peter, of Sally), they would grow old. A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wreathed about with chatter,

defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter. This he had preserved. (Woolf 184)

Referring to the act of throwing change into a lake as a metaphor for life, Clarissa acknowledges the pittance she has invested in living. However, although it feels measly, it is far more than Septimus. This tithe to life, no matter how insecure it feels, grants her access to the mass denoted as “them:” the insufferable socialites, magnanimous politicians, and cherished friends, when she buys into life she finds herself among them all. Sally and Peter, and the memories of her own existence they harbor, are worth dealing with the others, Clarissa resolves. Although the objects of her nostalgia are constantly “obscured” and “let drop every day,” Septimus’ death, inviting Clarissa to fundamentally reject her existence too, gives Clarissa an opportunity to prize them. Her choice to return indoors, in search of Sally and Peter (who are also searching for her), gives Clarissa unprecedented agency. While by no means erasing the oppressive, alienating dimensions of the domestic sphere and homemaking, Septimus’ death brings into focus the preciousness of these ephemeral acquaintances with the sweetness at the heart of her nostalgia.



## Troubling Binaries

Nella Larsen's second novel, *Passing*, tells the story of two light-skinned biracial women who reunite by chance after twelve years apart.<sup>14</sup> In the time that has passed, Irene has married a dark-skinned doctor named Brian, moved to Harlem, and had two sons. Clare, in the same time, has married a white man named Jack under the pretense she, too, is white. She has one daughter, and moves frequently for her husband's work. Irene is incredulous that Clare manages a life of constant passing, but has little chance to ask Clare about such an existence because Clare is eager to hear about the lives of their childhood friends. The two women part with intent to see one another again, and, despite the risks involved, Clare increasingly integrates herself into Irene's life. Clare captivates Irene's black friends, and Irene begins to resent Clare and suspect her of having an affair with her husband.

Through the relationship between these two women, Larsen's novel above all highlights the complexities of identity; specifically, she shows the difficulty these two biracial women face to find a mode of existence in the early-twentieth century that sustains both their gendered, racialized bodies. Locating such a space proves complicated because, as nonwhite women, they are barred from public life and confined to particular domestic boundaries not only on account of their gender but also their race. Liberty

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<sup>14</sup> Larsen never names the race identities of Clare or Irene. Therefore, in this paper I defer to the terms "biracial" and "mixed" interchangeably to refer to bodies with both black and white ancestry which, although unfortunately suggesting a false biological construction of race, are slightly preferable to other terms used by scholars like "mulatto" or "mulatta," which have their roots as pejorative identifiers used by American slaveholders. Race is a social construction, but as all of these terms intimate, historically, racialized non-white bodies (especially black bodies) have been demarcated in terms of "blood" or other troublesome material, genetic-oriented language.

granted to white women or to black men in modern America does necessarily extend to black and biracial women because they face intersecting, compounding structures of oppression. Specifically in respect to biracial women, rights and spaces predicated on the binary of white and black cannot be wholly theirs. Spaces for women shift and expand in the modern era, but these spaces remain mutually exclusive because of racial segregation. Consequently, light-skinned biracial women like Irene and Clare must choose between white and black domestic spaces in order to have any space at all as women. However, imposing the simultaneity of their identities onto a binary framework inherently results in some misalignment, which manifests in *Passing* as insecurity and dissatisfaction.

While the vulnerability Clare begets from passing as white, especially in light of her egregiously bigoted husband, is perhaps more apparent, Irene also risks her well-being by assuming the life of a black woman. For Clare, being outed as an imposter or outsider to whiteness would ruin her marriage. In light of her estrangement from her family, the loss of her marriage would decimate Clare, leaving her with essentially no relationships or modes of sustaining herself. For Irene, the repercussions of being understood as something other than black are less starkly material, but still momentous. She risks losing the distinctly black social network and family from which she derives her worth.

The questions and complexities of racialized female identity at the core of the novel create tension because their formulations are neither straightforward nor static. Judith Butler argues “blackness is not a primarily visual mark in Larsen’s story, not only because Irene and Clare are both light-skinned, but because what can be seen, what qualifies as a visible marking, is a matter of being able to read a marked body in relation

to unmarked bodies, where unmarked bodies constitute the currency of normative whiteness” (209). Butler notes that constructions of race in *Passing*, contrary to empirical ways of knowing, is not visual, but instead reliant on spaces and other people. Such is the case when Irene, sitting by herself for tea at a white-only restaurant, comforts herself in the face of a stranger’s gaze with the fact “They always took her for an Italian, a Spaniard, a Mexican, or a gipsy. Never, when she was alone, had they even remotely seemed to suspect that she was a Negro” (Larsen 11). Especially in the upper-class, blackness is substantiated by company throughout the novel. This is why Jack Bellow, Clare’s racist husband has no problem being charming to Irene upon their meeting, while in the same breath unleashing horrendous, racist diatribes; because the possibility exists for Irene not to be black (in the lightness of her skin) and she is associated with Clare, whom he understands as white, Irene is granted whiteness without a second thought. That is, until years later, when Irene and her darker-skinned friend, Felise, come across Jack by happenstance. The modes of communication that once granted Irene whiteness in the eyes of Jack flip, and now no words are exchanged, but the visual pairing of Irene next to a black woman present Irene’s same body as undoubtably black. This example highlights the importance of both space and other bodies in pinpointing identity; where bodies are situated proves crucial to passing or being detected as black. It is important to note that such capricious, relative racializing in the novel by no means lessens its implications. In fact, the lack of visibility complicit in racializing characters paradoxically draws attention to this danger in that, throughout the novel, what is not seen or cannot be seen causes the most trouble.

Space has also even more fraught implications for biracial or mixed-race individuals like Clare and Irene. Barbara Johnson outlines how Nella Larsen's earlier work, *Quicksand*, wrestles with the trope of the "tragic mulatto."<sup>15</sup> Specifically, Johnson highlights how the question of race in regards to mixed or biracial bodies has historically been tethered to questions of place. Succinctly, she outlines how those with mixed heritage were sorted in the lives and spaces of one of their parents: "Shack or big house, North or South, Europe or America" (Johnson 253). In this litany of binaries, Johnson illustrates the inaccurate and unsatisfactory locations assigned to biracial people, which always rely on inadequate notions of wholeness to identify the bodies that belong there. The hybridity of "mulatto" or biracial bodies, although forced to conscribe to one or the other, is fundamentally incompatible with the binaries maintained by racist hegemony. This misalignment is also central to *Passing*. Clare and Irene have mixed heritage and womanhood in common, but the spaces they occupy are nevertheless foreign to each other. Clare marries a white man and lives her life constantly passing in white spaces while moving about for her husband's work. Irene, on the other hand, marries a black man with dark skin and remains in her opulent Harlem home performing typical upper-class domestic duties like raising children and throwing parties. Like Johnson's pairings, their lives reflects the societal insistence of flawed dichotomies, prompting Clare and Irene to choose one or the other, when their biracial identity calls for both, or perhaps

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<sup>15</sup> Judith R. Berzon and Werner Sollors provide more extensive histories of the "tragic mulatto" trope in African American literature, and for more lengthy analysis of its presence in *Passing*, see and Jacquelyn McLendon's *The Politics of Color in the Fiction of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen* and the work of Reginald Watson.

something different altogether. This mutual exclusivity requires Clare and Irene to alienate a part of themselves in order to secure a place to live.

When the two women meet, they see in each other both a shared identity and a glimpse into the part of themselves they have foreclosed in order to live a white or black life. Their paths, paradoxically, can only cross when they both enter a place where neither of them are technically supposed to be. In the middle of a warm Chicago day, they both retire to the rooftop tearoom of Drayton's, a white-only space. However, both women pass seamlessly, only capturing the notice of one another. As soon as Clare enters Drayton's, Irene becomes fixated. She does not yet recognize Clare as an acquaintance from her past, but still pays her extraordinary attention; after being drawn in by the charm of her voice, Irene cannot help but to marvel at Clare's exquisite clothes, face, and body. The two stare at one another for an unusual amount of time, and Irene's admiration gradually gives way to self-conscious anxiety, as she begins to wonder whether this woman stares because she, somehow, detects Irene's blackness. Clare approaches Irene, calling her "Rene," a nickname she has not used since high school. Despite this chronological hint, Irene fails to place the striking woman who clearly recalls her. It is only upon hearing her "tinkling" laugh that Irene recognizes Clare Kendry, her old schoolmate. The gravity of their meeting does not lie in their rekindled friendship, but in the ineffable identification with and attraction to one another. They are drawn together at Drayton's, and continue to be drawn together throughout the novel, because they are captivated by what the other symbolizes, not necessarily who they are.

Though they are drawn together by something they share, their discussion largely pertains to how their lives diverge because the ways in which they pass in their respective

racialized spaces are vastly different. Clare opens up about her relationship with John, or Jack, Bellow, reflecting to Irene how, when Clare met Jack during high school, “I stopped slipping off to the south side and slipped off to meet him Instead. I couldn't manage both. In the end I had no great difficulty In convincing him that it was useless to talk marriage to the aunts. So on the day that I was eighteen, we went off and were married” (Larsen 20). Considering that “south side” indicates the spot for the black students to congregate, Clare posits her decision to pass, to date Jack, in spatial terms. She simply could not inhabit both at once, and so chose to move in the literal opposite direction as her black or mixed peers and opt for the space of white people. Furthermore, her marriage entails going “off” from even the traditional, religious white home of Clare’s aunts. To forge a successful marriage, that is a marriage in which Clare unflaggingly passes, requires separation akin to isolation. Even Irene, who “wished to find out about this hazardous business of ‘passing’” that defines Clare’s life, considers the act a negotiation of spaces, defining it in her mind as “this breaking away from all that was familiar and friendly to take one's chance in another environment, not entirely strange, perhaps, but certainly not entirely friendly” (17). Both women speak of passing as the act of navigating spatial binaries to literally situate oneself in the place that, while always imperfect and somewhat “unfriendly,” at least offers them some advantage.

Irene’s curiosity about passing in this moment seems ironic, given that she is passing as she chats with Clare at Drayton’s. What more is there to know? However, once Irene leaves the rooftop, she will return to her “familiar and friendly” black home with Brian, while Clare will continue to pass in her marriage to the ostensibly white Jack Bellow. Irene’s inquiry makes more sense when considering this difference. That is, Irene

wonders how Clare can not only pass in public, but in private. She cannot fathom how her home, the place figured most broadly as a haven, can instead be a site of constant threat, and why one would choose this type of home when other options theoretically exist.

Part of Irene's disbelief stems from her position and consequent priorities as a nonwhite woman living in the North post-Reconstruction. When she chooses to live in a black household, she must reconcile the changing position of black people as it manifests specifically or black domesticity and womanhood in the United States in the early twentieth century. Because these shifting societal expectations for black people recapitulate white standards of propriety, Irene must perform additional work to navigate these compound structures that both exclude her. In his analysis of *Passing*, Jack Hering provides a useful overview of how black families, many of whom moved to northern cities in the wake of the Great Migration, in the early decades of the twentieth century sought a sort of "idealized domesticity" in response to new configurations of segregation and racism. Hering posits that "Irene shares the post-Reconstruction faith that adopting middle-class values will secure the protections and promises of the Reconstruction Amendments" (38). In representing Irene as an adherent to this philosophy, despite her mixed race, Hering argues that Larsen toys with the broader "post-Reconstruction response to segregation by African-American women novelists attempted to shore up and expand the 'black' heterosexualized middle-class home as a *cordon sanitaire*" (Hering 37). Invoking the trope of blackness as a contagion, his argument is that black homemakers co-opted the logic of segregationists, and white people more broadly, to formulate models of propriety and success in black communities. Irene seems to practice

this mode of upper-class domesticity: her life, seemingly just like that of white women, revolves around her children and consists of managing her household staff, coordinating charitable fundraisers, throwing parties, and shopping for the goods requisite for these undertakings. However, these occupations, which seek to assert social and economic equality do not bridge the separation between white and black people, and more often confirm racial difference.

Despite the structural impossibility of black families being perceived as equal to white families, the overarching goal of Irene's labor is to, in the terminology of W.E.B. Du Bois, "uplift"<sup>16</sup> herself (and, in the case of her fundraising for Negro Welfare League, her race). Du Bois argued that the wealthiest, most educated African Americans comprised what he coined as the "talented tenth." This group, according to De Bois, was responsible for leading the race and leading exemplary lives. This entailed adopting white standards of success to show without question that black people could achieve and sustain the same economically and socially successful lifestyle as their white counterparts. Through this assimilation to white standards of success, black Americans, beginning with the "talented tenth," would prove themselves full citizens worthy in the eyes of whites of post-Reconstruction legal equality.

In a sense, the execution of these "uplift" practices, which structurally align to those of prosperous white Americans, embodies the notion of "separate but equal." But as even the most cursory glance at history reveals, separation inherently denotes power structures which make equality impossible. Hering alludes to this instability of the uplift

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<sup>16</sup> A noun and verb, uplift is one of several foundational concepts coined by Du Bois to describe post-Reconstruction African American society in his 1903 essay "The Souls of Black Folk."



mentality in his reading of Clare's death as one at the hands of Irene, spurred by desperation to maintain control of her home. However, such a reading collapses the complexities of Clare and Irene, reducing them to white-passing domestic competitors bickering over the man and mansion. Conceptualizing Clare and Irene's relationships to home and other another is impossible in a framework that denies intersectionality; although post-Reconstruction African American culture seemingly adopted white structures, these structures became fundamentally different when black people wield them. Consequently, white women's domesticity informs how white people perceive Irene and Clare, but it fails to expose their motives or priorities. As Rita Felski underscores in her more general conversation about the treatment of black bodies in the modern western world: "Any notion of a common political identity or set of interests arising out of shared oppression as women disappears here behind the sexualization and pathologization of racial categories that permeated the culture of the fin de siecle" (163). Because standards of domesticity and broader social structures governing black women derive from white structures does not mean they are interchangeable. Despite sharing a biracial identity, Clare and Irene's modes of domesticity are oppositional, utterly unknown by the other.

Delving into how each woman's home relates to her biracial womanhood, though, proves difficult because Irene does not return Clare's inquiries into her home life, rendering Clare's domestic passing unknowable. Instead, the novel ventures into Irene's domestic sphere. Larsen explores the complexities of Irene's relationship with her husband and children, while the act of passing to her racist husband (even in the raising of her daughter) comes to encapsulate Clare's entire domestic existence. Her home

remains stubbornly obscured until it is eventually eclipsed by Irene's home altogether. For instance, when the two part after their tea, they agree to call on one another soon, but when Irene returns home to her father's house she realizes:

Clare had omitted to mention her marriage name. She had referred to her husband as Jack. That was all. Had that, Irene asked herself, been intentional? Clare had only to pick up the telephone to communicate with her, or to drop her a card, or to jump into a taxi. But she couldn't reach Clare in any way. Nor could anyone else to whom she might speak of their meeting. (Larsen 22)

Rather than perceiving this potentially benign oversight as a mistake, Irene believes that Clare may have manipulated or deceived her. The imbalance of knowledge unsettles Irene, suggesting it may reflect an imbalance of power as well. At the most superficial level, this signals how vastly different — to the point of mutual exclusivity — Irene and Clare's homes and lives are, despite their similar identities. Irene goes on to list the multitude of ways Clare has access to her life, which in turn juxtaposes the absolute lack of access Irene has to Clare in her home. Though, arguably, this lack of access would still be the case even if Clare disclosed her husband's last name or her address. Requisite in Clare's project of passing in her marriage to Jack is spatial isolation from black markers, and Irene (emblematic of upper-class black domesticity) would be incoherent with and a threat to Clare's white home.

Clare's isolation continues to agitate Irene even when the two are separated; Irene remains steadfast in her Harlem home while Clare sends her daughter abroad for school and travels the country with Jack for his work. Two years after their meeting at

Drayton's, Clare sends Irene a letter that, rather than withholding information, Irene finds "a bit too lavish in its wordiness, a shade too unreserved in the manner of its expression" (Larsen 36). After such a span of being out of contact, Irene is reluctant to reconnect with Clare and in her search for excuses not to respond, notices Clare omitted to put a return address on the letter. The narrator relays, "That had angered Irene, and increased her disdain and contempt for the other" (43). Configuring Clare as "the other" draws attention to Irene's perception that she and Clare are somehow at odds. Her anger stems from the fact "that Clare should have doubted her discretion, implied that she might not be cautious in the wording of her reply and the choice of a posting-box. Having always had complete confidence in her own good judgment and tact, Irene couldn't bear to have anyone seem to question them. Certainly not Clare Kendry" (43-44). The hiddenness of Clare's home is once again a site of perturbation for Irene. Ironically and tellingly, this explanation for her anger has far more to do with Irene herself than Clare. Irene dismisses any innocent explanation for Clare's omission and instead insists on reading the lack of a return address as a malignant insinuation about her character. Her indignation can be understood as defensiveness; Irene expects "especially Clare Kendry" to undermine or threaten her "judgement and tact" and other exceptional qualities like homemaking. Being perceived as moral is paramount to Irene and is inextricable from her domestic priorities. With this in mind, Irene construes Clare — who travels constantly without a sense of home, the physical manifestation of female morality — as a threat because so much of Irene's sense of worth is bound up in the black domestic life she has chosen. Ironically, in response to this perceived affront, Irene fails to act tactfully, and never responds to the letter. But this decision made in the interest of preserving her moral

character and cherished home has the opposite effect; the lack of response propels Clare to visit Irene in her Harlem home.

In stark contrast to Clare's domestic void, Irene's home is the epicenter of the novel. Countering stereotypical notions of a remote private sphere, Irene's home is a hub of activity. Guest and gatherings abound, and there are constantly children, a spouse, and servants milling around. Like those of the Harlem Renaissance, Larsen's fictional parties and gatherings blur together because all the hostesses and their families resemble Irene's; they are all seeking to adhere to ideals of post-Reconstruction upper-class black society. As Judith Butler synthesizes, this "moral notion of 'race' [...] requires the idealization of bourgeois family life in which women retain their place in the family" (Butler 275). Overall, Irene seems content with the labor necessary to keep this moral, black home. Aside from tending to her sons and husband on occasion, the bulk of Irene's domestic activity consists of planning fundraisers, birthday parties, and other charming gatherings. At one point, when Clare jokes to undermine this sort of traditional domestic work, Irene retorts: "I am wrapped up in my boys and the running of my house. I can't help it. And, really, I don't think it's anything to laugh at" (Larsen 58). Homemaking is a serious business because it constitutes Irene's worth and, in the context of racial uplift, the fruit of her labor becomes indicative of African American's worth.

In *Passing*, a central facet of Irene's mode of domesticity is planning and hosting parties. But when, at the final party of the novel, Irene becomes overwhelmed with anxieties about the soundness of her marriage (and, consequently, her home), the narrator stresses how security is fundamental to Irene's sense of home: "She was aware that, to her, security was the most important and desired thing in life. Not for any of the others, or

for all of them, would she exchange it. She wanted only to be tranquil. Only, unmolested, to be allowed to direct for their own best good the lives of her sons and her husband” (76). In the midst of an apparent domestic success, she feels like she is on the brink of failure. Faced with suspicions of her husband’s infidelity, her family failing, it makes sense that Irene demands the security advertised by the domestic sphere. Even though her conception of ideal security relies on other person to attend her parties and be a part of her family, but her relationships with others are less important than the self-preservation offered by this type of security; it does not require compromise, and would grant her control over her family. Implicit in Irene’s plea is the realization that her current home fails to grant her sufficient security, and although this unequivocal security Irene wishes for may sound impossible and desperate, should not her creation of the consummate “uplifted” black home entitle her to such security?

It follows that if to serve as a model black family is Irene’s goal to attain some sort of security (or the goal thrust upon her), she needs material and emotional security to do it. However, so intertwined are this goal and its byproducts that any threat to one becomes a threat to the other. For example, when Clare arrives to follow-up in person about the unanswered letter, Irene grounds her excuse in her preoccupation with security, telling Clare she did not want to endanger her by replying. Clare scoffs at the claim, and insists that sending the letter was safe. Clare’s denial unsettles Irene; as the narrator details, “[Irene] was aware, too, of a dim premonition of some impending disaster. It was as if Clare Kendry had said to her, for whom safety, security, were all-important: ‘Safe! Damn being safe!’ and meant it” (47). This woman without a home or regard for personal and social safety goes against the fundamental character and aim of Irene’s life. All she

sacrifices, she does so for what she conceives as safety and security in her black household, while Clare appears to prioritize happiness even in the face of substantial risk.

But perhaps security and happiness can be construed more similarly than either character acknowledges. Their desires seemingly manifest as opposites in both aim and practice, but Clare and Irene ultimately share a fundamental desire for belonging borne out of their racial misalignment with both white and black communities. Because they chose opposite racialized lives through their respective marriages, their different configurations of their homes reflect their paths to belonging. Irene opts to curate the ideal house of the “New Negro” family to present a what she believes is an inarguable success story of racial uplift; Clare’s success as a woman in a white marriage is predicated on obfuscation, consequently requiring her to obscure her home from recognition. Fundamental to Irene’s security within her home is a sense of complete control and ability to overlook all domestic happens, whereas Clare’s home is only safe if it completely out of sight and too ephemeral to pin down. Neither of these oppositional modes of domesticity can guarantee security desired by Irene and Clare. Even domestic space, the site of quintessential refuge, begets concessions and vulnerability of these biracial women.

In a comprehensive survey of spaces, the novel follows the relationship between Irene and Clare gradually from the public into the private sphere over the course of the novel, as well as moving from spaces controlled and curated by and for white people to those by and for black people. Most of the latter two sections of the novel are spent in Irene’s home or black homes similar to it. The time Irene and Clare spend in these homes teems with attempts by both women to reconcile the opposition they entertain between

white and black homes. Though the novel pays more attention to Irene's black home, to read this structural emphasis as a sweeping endorsement ignores the ways in which black domestic spaces, while less blatantly alienating than white spaces, fail both women who expect it to be a haven.

Clare enters Irene's home for reprieve from the oppressive anxiety of passing constantly to her racist husband. If whiteness is stifling, blackness promises liberation. She begs of Irene to attend the Negro Welfare League dance, telling her "You don't know, you can't realize how I want to see Negroes, to be with them again, to talk with them, to hear them laugh" (51). Scholars like Donovan Ramon read Clare's somewhat ironic desire<sup>17</sup> to "see Negroes" as a clear manifestation of Du Bois' "double consciousness" in that Clare is a white-passing black person seeking above all to spectate the joy of blackness (50-51). However, this analysis suppresses the gendered tones of Clare's appeal. If truly all she desires is to see black people celebrating, sneaking off to any black club or jazz lounge would satisfy her. Instead, Clare yearns to go with another nonwhite woman in a black home, to witness and experience the private life of black families. In light of this understanding, Ramon's assertion that Clare only "wants to be invited only after being linked to the white gaze," fails to align fully with what Clare actually asks for: as it is the supposed antithesis from the oppressive vacuousness and alienation of her white home, she seeks reprieve through immersion in a black home (50). As a woman, she must seek out a setting compatible with her femaleness.

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<sup>17</sup> Clare is consistently an object to behold, and scholars such as Judith Butler, Anthony Dawahare, and Cherene Sherrard-Johnson discuss how black and white, male and female, characters fetishize Clare. In this moment, however, Clare potentially usurps her position as a fetishized object in expressing her desire to gaze upon black bodies in black spaces.

Additionally, descriptions of Clare's eyes themselves — the tools of her gaze — reinforce a more complex understanding of Clare's aims as a biracial woman. Throughout the novel Clare's skin is described as "ivory," and at the Freeland's party, Irene observes Clare's "ivory lids over astonishing black eyes" (Larsen 66). Generally synonymous with white, "ivory" in reference to Clare sets her subtly apart from white people. Her skin is something that looks white, but in reality is something right beside it. Simultaneously, this description grants Clare value — her perceived whiteness is coveted like precious ivory — while reinscribing her immutable, exotic difference from white people. Just as her gaze is constructed of both something like whiteness and shrouded blackness, Clare's initial appeal to Irene refers to black people as both "others" and the community from which she comes. While her gender correlates her with domestic spaces, her racial identity traps her in a bind of simultaneity within a society of binaries. However, in her experience as a nonwhite woman, heading a white household and rearing a white child is deeply unsatisfying, so black spaces present themselves as a hopeful alternative despite the partial dissonance she feels from them.

Externally, Irene agrees to grant Clare access to the party seemingly out of propriety and pity, but her decision also suggests Irene feels defensive of her black mode of domesticity of life and seeks to the approval and validation of Clare. Clare bearing witness to the success of Irene life will silence her fears that her life is somehow lacking, that the private life she has created is not as good — or even better — than the white world from which Clare and Irene's standards of racial uplift come. To this end, when she sees her husband dancing with Clare more than once, "Irene was glad that he was being nice to Clare, and glad that Clare was having the opportunity to discover that some



coloured men were superior to some white men” (54). In being kind to Clare with knowledge of her racial identity, Brian’s character bests Clare’s bigoted husband. While he may not have whiteness, Irene’s dark-skinned husband offers a superior form of masculinity and consequently vindicates Irene’s choices and lifestyle. Her superior husband signifies a superior home, quelling any insecurities that her black domestic life could fail to measure up to white domesticity.

However, this interaction that satisfies Irene at first eventually becomes the site of her profound anxiety as Clare’s presence morphs from reassuring to destabilizing. Rather than validating Irene’s way of domestic life, she increasingly raises uncomfortable questions. For instance, when Irene assures Clare being reunited with her daughter will mitigate the unhappiness she feels about her marriage, Clare responds, “Children aren’t everything” and through off-putting laughter continues, “there are other things in the world, though I admit some people don’t seem to suspect it” (58). The narrator observes her laughter emanates from “some secret joke of her own than at her words” (58). Clare’s laughter and dismissal of maternity disturbs Irene because it runs counter to the gravity Irene assigns her traditional domestic duties. Clare’s words make Irene defensive because her children, the point of a marriage and a home, are the linchpin of Irene’s existence — they *are* everything in the model of home Irene clings to. In tandem, Clare’s laughter and words do not merely voice an unpalatable alternative, but in naming the vastness of options theoretically available to a woman like Clare or Irene she undermines the foundation on which Irene built her life. What Irene figures as bonds of security Clare reimagines as fetters.

This moment also reveals how, as Clare spends more time in Irene's home, she too experiences unforeseen, paradoxical feelings. A burgeoning sense of dread to return home to Jack tempers the joy she feels among black people. As Clare laments about her stifled white life, Irene, rather than empathy, only extends cold pragmatism to her friend, telling her, "As far as I can see, you'll just have to endure some things and give up others" (51). Irene preaches to Clare the doctrine she herself has adopted to survive. Compromises — which always include unhappiness — are part of the black-and-white world in which they live. She advises Clare as if it is the only choice because, for Irene, it has been. Yet, manifest in this moment as well as later when Clare undermines Irene's mode of maternity, their relationship highlights the lack in Irene's life as a result of constantly "enduring" and compromising. Clare begs Irene to invite her to the dance that evening as a reprieve, but it is not her words that convince Irene. Instead, Clare's body wears away Irene's resolve; the narrator conveys that "in the look [Clare] gave Irene, there was something groping, and hopeless, and yet so absolutely determined that it was like an image of the futile searching and the firm resolution in Irene's own soul, and increased the feeling of doubt and compunction that had been growing within her about Clare Kendry. She gave in." (Larsen 51). Clare's words consistently make Irene recoil, but her body draws Irene towards her.

As was also the case in their initial meeting at Drayton's, without language, Clare is more compelling to Irene because there is less to obscure the profound ways in which they connect. In Clare's gaze and "image," Irene is able to recognize their shared character, matching the "searching" and "resolution" within herself to the concurrent "groping" and determination of Clare. In their lives it seems as if Clare acts out searching while Irene

holds immovably to her way of life. Yet, in this moment the narrator acknowledges that the contradictory impulses to search and remain fixed exist simultaneously in both Clare and Irene. The fact that their bodies actualize this knowledge brings to the fore the greatest paradoxical affinity they share: as biracial women, homes that offer refuge in some sense also inevitably beget alienation. Thought to be free, happy, and safe in her home by Clare, Irene confesses that, since knowing Clare, “I’m beginning to believe [...] that no one is ever completely happy, or free, or safe” (48). Despite the steady potential of solidarity between the two biracial women, Clare destabilizes Irene’s perception of her own life to the extent Irene begins to doubt the thing she values most. Albeit in different ways, they both imagine that their relationship will enhance their sense of belonging, foster a stronger connection to home. Yet, once they cross paths, no space seems to suit Clare and Irene. White or black, private or public, there appears to be no space in the binaries granted to them where their bodies must no longer search and grope for a desire for which they do not have language.

Moments of failing language like this one populate the novel, especially between Clare and Irene, and indicate the difficulty of conceptualizing their relationship with normative tools. These wordless exchanges — such as their intense mutual gazing upon their first meeting — between Irene and Clare are oftentimes profound and influential precisely because words do not suffice in such moments. Judith Butler connects these breaks in language to other instances of breakdown or ambiguity encapsulated by the term “queer,” observing, “When Irene’s conversation falters, the narrator refers to the sudden gap in the surface of language as ‘queer’ or as ‘queering’” (273). She goes on to qualify, “at the time, it seems, *queer* did not yet mean homosexual, but it did encompass

an array of meaning associated with the deviation from the normalcy that might well include the sexual: of obscure origin, the state of feeling ill or bad, not straight, obscure, perverse, eccentric” (273-274). Within Butler’s framework, both women, because their race is “of obscure origins” in that it is neither “fully” white or black, adopt misfitting frameworks, and the dissonance between their bodies and their domestic spaces can be understood as queerness. Butler’s association between absence of language with non-normative phenomena begins to explain how Clare’s body alone could persuade Irene to reconsider a core conviction of her life as well as invite Clare to the party despite her “doubt and compunction.” Clare’s dangerous social deviation by passing in her marriage instigate or correlate to something equally ineffable in Irene.

Additionally, Irene and Clare’s relationship is “queer” because it does not lend itself well to language, a standard tool of description. Citing the “queer ideas” that Irene’s sons pick up school, Butler hedges “that Larsen links queerness with a potentially problematic eruption of sexuality seems clear” (274). Such eruptions are any that transgress the racist, futurist heteropatriarchy. That is to say, sexuality that is not heterosexual or that runs the risk of miscegenation cannot be conveyed by words in *Passing*. Instead, the narrator must rely on shrouded, distanced language to convey the nonverbal, “queer” modes of persuasion of Clare’s female biracial body. As Clare begs her to go to the dance, Irene can only conclude there is “something groping” in Clare’s body. This enigmatic observation connotes awkward, desperate eroticism, one predicated on the similarity of their identities (and bodies), despite their opposing lifestyles and homes. Irene finds herself compelled by Clare because she is attracted to her. Even before Irene remembers Clare’s identity at Drayton’s, the beautiful anonymous woman with a

“slightly husky” voice, a “peculiar caressing smile,” and “strange languorous eyes ” mesmerizes Irene (Larsen 9-10). All of these descriptions soften Clare’s allure because, without modifiers indicating some obscure or eccentric dimension, such admirations of physical beauty of a woman could not come from another heterosexual woman.

Therefore, Irene queers her compliments and, of course, verbalizes none of them.

Her compliments also focus unwittingly on features oftentimes relied upon to assign either whiteness or blackness to Clare and Irene throughout the novel. With this in mind, Butler is quick to underscore how this sort of attraction cannot be merely read as one of homosexuality, asserting instead, “The conflict of lesbian desire in the story can be read in what is almost spoken, in what is withheld from speech, but which always threatens to stop or disrupt speech. And in the sense the muteness of homosexuality converges in the story with the illegibility of Clare’s blackness” (273). Butler connects the ways in which sexuality and racial identity resist expression in the novel, and in this sense are both queer. Irene’s attraction to Clare, which ultimately prompts her granting Clare an invite to the party, cannot be unknotted from their sameness — not only in the sense of their homogenous genders, but also their shared race. Such a convergence occurs after Irene meets Jack Bellew and Clare for tea. At home alone, Irene cannot stop returning to her memory of Clare’s face as the women parted ways. On Clare’s face, a primary site of nonverbal expressions as well as racial markers, Irene detects “something menacing,” as well as “something else for which she could find no name [and] utterly beyond any experience or comprehension of hers” (33). These vague descriptors could be equally applicable to the empirical physicality of her face in its color and configuration or to a sort of ineffable beauty. Because Irene does not yet recognize Clare (and her

passing), these observations bend towards the erotic, but also resist being fully readable as either material or immaterial, racial or sexual.

Entertaining these nebulous intersections yields the richest reading of *Passing*; as Butler assures Larsen's readers, "It is unnecessary to choose whether this novella is 'about' race or 'about' sexuality and sexual conflict, but that the two domains are inextricably linked, such that the text offers a way to read the racialization of sexual conflict" (Butler 272). Acknowledging the interweaving of sexual and racial conflict in Irene and Clare's relationship as well as lives is crucial to grasping the tensions and stakes of the novel. Nothing propels the plot forward more than sexual conflict, which is always in conversation with race. Furthermore, resisting the intersection of these two markers yields an incomplete reading as one dimension will always implicate the other. For instance, from the first moment Irene beholds Clare, she automatically sizes up the anonymous white man with whom she is speaking. His presence normalizes her queer feelings, as his association simultaneously secures Clare's whiteness and heterosexuality. Additionally, the story is a story at all only because Clare seeks out Irene, believing that somehow Irene's black womanhood can provide satisfaction that her husband cannot. Although they may be at the heart of *Passing*, these kernels of queerness, which defy language, must be integrated into normative narratives by which these characters must live.

This process results in the love (and race) triangle between Clare, Irene, and Brian at the center of the novel. This triangulation happens, Butler argues, because "Irene passes her desire for Clare through Brian; he becomes the fantasmic occasion for Irene to consummate her desire for Clare, but also to deflect from the recognition that it is her

desire that is being articulated through Brian” (276). Butler construes the affair between Clare and Brian as a tool Irene conjures in order to normalize her queer bond with Clare. Two heterosexual relationships legitimate a homosexual one because there is no language for nor are there any social structures in place to foster queer sexual desire within Irene’s understanding and society’s conception of sexuality. As a nonwhite woman who seeks security in her traditional domestic configuration, acting out heterosexuality is mandatory; subsequently, Brian is positioned to be the ideal object of Irene’s desire. Within this framework of normative monogamous heterosexuality, an extramarital affair signals failure. Irene’s desire for Clare also signals the failure of Irene’s marriage, but reimagining this failure as an affair maintains adherence to the normative structures that are supposed to govern Irene’s life. Being attracted to Clare and Brian having an affair present themselves as different means to the same end. This is why Irene never names infidelity. Grouping it with all of the other “queer” things left unsaid in the novel, Irene antagonizes herself with thoughts of “this thing” that, by intangible mechanisms, makes her unbearably jealous and unhappy.

Furthermore, a hypothetical affair functions in the same way as suppressed queer sexual desire in that both threaten her marriage to Brian, and the subsequent security furnished by their home. At one point, Irene attempts to take comfort in Clare’s departure for Canada with her husband, her retreat into the white world, but instead is tormented with conflicting alliances. Without naming what precisely positions Clare as her antagonist, the narrator tells how Irene “was caught between two allegiances, different, yet the same. Herself. Her race. Race! The thing that bound and suffocated her. Whatever steps she took, or if she took none at all, something would be crushed. A person or the

race. Clare, herself, or the race. Or, it might be, all three. Nothing, she imagined, was ever more completely sardonic” (69). Emphatic and desperate, Irene feels the woe of a betrayed spouse, but assigns the agency to decide or remedy the situation not on Brian, but herself. Though figured through the comprehensive, nameable event of an affair between her husband and Clare, Irene in this moment reconciles the instability her relationship with Clare ushers into her home. The most secure home for Irene is both heterosexual and black, so, on one hand, as both a white-passing biracial woman and the object of queer desire, the threat Clare poses is twofold. Yet, on the other hand, Clare offers unprecedented sameness, which throws into relief the misalignment between Irene and the construction of home on which she relies. With this in mind, Irene’s “two alliances, different, yet the same” can be understood as Brian and Clare, normative blackness or queer white-passing. Despite their similarity in some sense, as the violent language in the passage underscores, the two relationships ultimately feel mutually exclusive. She must privilege one alliance, one conception of home, over another but the choice feels impossible; almost all choices endanger her because they force her to part with some aspect of racial security in the whiteness that she constantly performs. The choice between blackness and whiteness, heterosexuality and homosexuality leaves something intimate and integral to Irene “crushed.”

To avoid this ominous fate, Irene attempts to excise Clare from her black home, as if to move her queering body far away will erase the faultlines she throws into relief of Irene's home. Irene “outs” herself to Jack Bellew when she sees him on the street in hopes he will forbid Clare to associate with the Redfield’s. However, she cannot achieve her previous home by simply subtracting what has been added. In identifying with and



loving Clare, Irene has transformed irreversibly. Therefore, inadvertently, betraying Clare in her attempt to oust her, Irene also betrays herself. Butler maintains that this self-sabotaging duplicity spawns from normative forces beyond either woman's control:

If Irene turns on Clare to contain Clare's sexuality, as she turned on and extinguished her own passion, she does this under the under the eyes of the bellowing white man [...] And if Irene seeks to sustain the black family at the expense of passion and in the name of uplift, she does it in part to avoid the position for black women outside the family, that of being sexually degraded and endangered by the very terms of white masculinism that Bellew represents (280).

Foremost, this explanation as to Irene's retaliation works against the unconvincing formulations by some scholars who take heterosexuality as a given in *Passing*. For instance, Frank Hering construes Clare solely as "an obstacle to the realization of Irene's desires," rather than also the primary object of them (42). Irene also, of course, desires to live and has the option to avoid men like Jack Bellew and the violence they can inflict, even though such safety comes at the cost of significant happiness and liberty. Clare, on the other hand, has no alternatives once Irene retreats from her. Her only home is with Jack, and it is predicated on her perceived whiteness. Consequently, when Jack finds her among black people at the Freeland's, Clare is at once set apart from the black space when claimed as this white man's wife and denied access to her home because Jack now sees her as black.

Biracial identities prove as unplaceable as queer ones, but Clare cannot survive the upheaval; she falls out the window to her death in a moment the narrator neither

speaks nor shows. Butler reads her death as “[marking] the success of a certain symbolic ordering of gender, sexuality, and race, as it makes the sites of potential resistance” (279). That is to say, women who transgress normative racial and sexual boundaries, such as Clare has, cannot survive; there is no room for her at the (literal and symbolic) Freeland house. As the other party-goers rush outside to the body, Irene cannot leave the room in which Clare last lived, indicating both her singular connection to Clare and distinguishing her from the group of black guests. In grief and disbelief, she grapples with what she witnessed:

Gone! The soft white face, the bright hair, the disturbing scarlet mouth, the dreaming eyes, the caressing smile, the whole torturing loveliness that had been Clare Kendry. That beauty that had torn at Irene's placid life. Gone! The mocking daring, the gallantry of her pose, the ringing bells of her laughter. Irene wasn't sorry. She was amazed, incredulous almost. What would the others think? That Clare had fallen? That she had deliberately leaned backward? Certainly one or the other. Not — But she mustn't, she warned herself, think of that. She was too tired, and too shocked. And, indeed, both were true. (Larsen 80)

Touching each part in her thoughts, Irene removes the queering qualifiers as she recalls Clare's beautiful body. Though they are also the characteristics which damned Clare, Irene nostalgically thinks first of Clare's body because, to her, it is the conductor of their love and the foundation of their shared identity. As a result, the permanent loss of Clare's body — not just displaced, but ruined — cements for Irene the vulnerability of such bodies. Clare's death actualizes what can become of a woman like her when she forsakes

security for liberty. Although Irene chooses a different path, she understands Clare's predicament in life and death perfectly well, and in a way the other black people at the party cannot.

Because of this unique empathy, she wonders where the other guests will assign agency or blame in Clare's death. As the white policemen outside confirm when Irene goes downstairs, they can only see the potential for Clare to have complete agency or none at all. To fall both accidentally *and* on purpose seems impossible. But, as Irene knows from experience, everything about Clare Kendry in life and in death is incompatible with the binaries asserted by white men in suits. Despite her best efforts, Clare fails to feel completely at home in white spaces as well as black spaces, and her attempts to find a home somewhere in the middle instead leave her thrust outside. It is a harrowing reminder for Irene, who in her moment of acute shock and identification must "grasp hold of the banister to save herself from pitching downwards" along with Clare. Although it leaves Irene in isolation, she must hold fast to the architecture of the black uplifted home; now that the window is broken, it is the only thing that prevents Irene from Clare's fate.

## Conclusion

Though I have not touched on them in this project, there is a considerable body of scholarship that explicitly connects two or more of these texts. This is perhaps not surprising in light of the rich thematic ties between these novels. However, especially when considering gender, these two-part comparisons oftentimes oversimplify characters' experiences to create a monolithic portrait of modern womanhood. For instance, considering the continuity between *The House of Mirth* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, Kathy Fedorko grounds her argument in the affinities and acrimonies between Edith Wharton and Virginia Woolf as authors and individuals. From this conception of similar authorship, she claims that both women aim to critique essentially the same social systems, and contends that Clarissa Dalloway and Lily Bart face similar modes of oppression and both face turbulent relationships with men in their pursuit of intimacy and security. In the face of these shared traits, she argues Clarissa is able to survive the society Lily cannot because she taps into a nebulous joy in her life and has the material security to continue living.

The impulse to read Lily's death in light of Clarissa's life serves at least one important purpose: rather than writing off those who kill themselves, putting these texts into conversation, to see the echoes of a death in another's life, affirms a degree of influence of those who kill themselves. However, putting two characters from isolated texts into conversation and relying on the biographies of Woolf and Wharton clumsily collapses difference and makes dangerous assumptions. Reading Lily's suicide as a failure or guilty deed to be redeemed diminishes the insidious factors that shape her

destiny as well as erase her agency in the act. Furthermore, such an equation of Clarissa as her redeemer suppresses Clarissa's own suffering and utterly ignores the tragedy of Septimus' death. Each woman who considers or chooses to end their life in these texts does so on behalf of their own experience. Therefore, the trajectory of these deaths cannot be formulated as one of linear growth or even decline.

Yet, arguments like Fedorko's assume a stability of social structures affecting both the authors and their characters that implies a one-dimensional, constant trajectory of women's modern experience. Charlotte Perkins Gilman also assumes this sort of oversimplifying narrative of female experience. She employs the image of linear continuity to name one of her final chapters, "Lines of Advancement," in which she names possible solutions for the oppression of women in America. In it she marvels, "measuring the position of woman as it has been for all the years behind us up to a century or so ago with what it is to-day, the distance covered and the ratio of progress is incredible. It rolls up continually, accumulatively; and another fifty years will show more advance than the past five hundred" (326). Not only does Gilman impossibly locate women in a singular "position" within society, her model of liberation seems to assert an opaque "advancement" for advancement's sake. The depictions of women's lives in this project shed an ominous light on this equation; if the home exponentially "advances," so will its potential to be deadly to women.

The "lines" Gilman highlights as potential avenues to improve the home seek to liberate women while also maintaining some fundamental conception of what a home should be. To find reprieve from the onerous domestic duties that trap them inside the home, she calls upon a woman to hire increasingly-affordable kitchen help and nurses

who will do the work for her or to buy some food that is prepared to some degree. She does not challenge the commonplace essentializing of the modern woman as a domestic worker, responsible for feeding her family and raising her children; rather, she highlights modern tools that could offer temporary relief from these obligations. Beyond the unhelpful reifying of traditional domestic roles, Gilman also does not consider new challenges or threats modern life poses, only the new potential benefits.

Instead, Gilman worries that even the modest revisions to gender roles within the home will induce revulsion or fear. After outlining the many ways revisions to the home would enhance the lives of all members of the the family (as she understands it), she confronts those who are reluctant to change, rhetorically asking, “What have we to hope—or to dread—in the undeniable lines of development here shown?” While her entire project seeks to offer hope and endorse reform of the home, she recognizes the anxiety bred by the unknown, and reassures her readers with empathy. She tells them, her readers, “What most of us dread is this: that we shall lose our domestic privacy; that we shall lose our family dinner table; that woman will lose ‘her charm;’ that we shall lose our children; and the child lose its mother. We are mortally afraid of separation” (335). Though it is implicit in her reassurance, Gilman is right to understand that the stakes of the home are high. However, rather than reframing these changes as moves towards liberty, Gilman reassures her readers that the reformed home she envisions will not prompt these “losses,” that something whole will not be “separated.” Her conception of the modern home ultimately answers to patriarchal constructions of domesticity and gender rather than to women themselves.

As this project suggests, Gilman's model for the modern home, in reifying gender roles with only incremental gains of liberty, fails modern women. Especially in light of Gilman's ignorance of new modern vulnerabilities and risks paired with her faulty universalization of "woman," to protect some sort of essential notion of the home is not only unrealistic, but dangerous. The four novels comprising this project reveal the fault lines of modern progressivism in their resounding representation of the ways in which society fails to grant women a place they can endure, not to mention thrive. Evidenced by the suicides in these novels, modern domestic spaces resist the complexity of modern women, and to impose uniform expectations on unique bodies results in intolerable alienation.

Although I resist sketching a trajectory of the novels in my project for risk of suggesting an impossible ubiquity of domesticity or womanhood, considering a trajectory of the suicides they portray works against this impulse. The self-inflicted deaths in these novels become increasingly ambiguous and distanced over time. In *The Awakening*, the narrator wades into the ocean with Edna and even grants access to her final thoughts, though they are understood as final only due to their placement at the end of the novel rather than their content. By comparison, in *Passing*, only retroactive questions, blurry memories, and broken glass signal Clare's death, which emphasize finality but make assigning agency almost impossible. The escalating complexity and progressively blurred agency of the suicides in these novels reflects an expanding understanding of how the modern era muddles and destabilizes relationships between bodies and spaces, especially female bodies and homes. This multiplicity of shifts and ambiguities reconfigure

character's lives, even when they wish desperately for a static, knowable society like the one Gilman conceives.

Though a thorough nuanced discussion of the topic is beyond the scope of this project, by analyzing these characters' suicides within a broader discussion of the home, by no means do I mean to shroud or diminish the act of suicide. Choosing to die must not be treated as typical, as merely the logical outcome of a certain teleology, or read as a purely symbolic trope. Such responses devalue the monumental importance of the lives that suicide ends, unconscionably diminishing the tragedy of their death and absence in the lives of others. My project seeks acknowledge the profound loss of these private deaths by contextualizing them in discussions of gendered bodies and homes. The women in these texts who contemplate or commit suicide do so because no figurative or literal space allows them to live as they like, at least not without exorbitant compromises. Therefore, my study of suicide focuses less on the moment of death and more on the conditions that make choosing to live impossible.



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